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MISS VANDELEUR

BY THE AUTHOR OF

ABEL DRAKE'S WIFE

WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

1.—'ABEL DRAKE'S WIFE,'

Or the Story of an Inventor: the scene, Lancashire.

OPINIONS OF THE PRESS.

'This is a striking book, clever, interesting, and original. To all who take pleasure in the study of human nature, to all who are capable of recognising true nobility, even in the person of a poor factory girl, or of detecting one of a "nature's gentlemen" in the disguise of a humble adventurer, this work will be heartily welcome. We have seldom met with a book so thoroughly to life, so deeply interesting in its detail, and so touching in its simple pathos as "Abel Drake's Wife."'—*Athenæum.*

'Very few will read "Abel Drake's Wife" without eager interest, or lay it down without feeling that the writer, despite his deficiencies, is a man of original power. The truth is, he can *create*, not merely describe; can produce before us beings whom we recognise, and sympathise with, and feel we can comprehend.'—*Spectator.*

2.—'HIRELL,'*

Or Love Born of Strife.

Of which the chief events take place in Wales. It was dedicated, for literary reasons, to Mr Gladstone, and acknowledged by the Premier under peculiarly interesting circumstances, in the following letter, which he gave full liberty to publish:—

'11 CARLTON HOUSE TERRACE,
'*July* 31*st*, 1869.

'DEAR SIR,—'I postponed thanking you for your note of the 13th ult., and for the very obliging present of your work, from my desire to peruse the volumes in the first instance.

'A recent disposition [one that perhaps excited more alarm than the recent one] found me the opportunity sooner than I had expected; and I have read the whole with great interest and much admiration, both of its power, and its moral aims.

'I have the honour to be, dear Sir, your faithful Servant,
'J. Saunders, Esq.' 'W. E. GLADSTONE.'

'Nobody who appreciates a novel in proportion as it is well devised and well written, and reflects real life as in a faithful mirror, will fail to thank us for recommending 'Hirell' to them, with this avowedly unqualified praise.'—*Athenæum.*

In its annual retrospect of the Literature of Europe, the *Athenæum* a second time noticed the book; placing 'Hirell' *at the head of the novels of the year*, for this country.

* HIRELL—a Welsh word signifying Beam of Light—Angel.

'We have nothing but words of praise to offer for its style and composition. . . . Everyone who reads this novel will feel that he is communing with a writer of thoughtful and original spirit.'—*Examiner.*

'It is a powerful novel . . . a tale written by a poet. . . . Mr Saunders always writes the best kind of descriptive English—English as simple as cultivated talk—but rising now and then into strength and fervour.'—*Spectator.*'

'"Hirell" is a novel of great thought and considerable power. The writer, indeed, has so vividly conceived the central figures of his romance, that they seem in the end to possess him and the reader; to act under impulses of a sort of intelligent fate, and not by the will or direction even of the brain from which they have sprung. Greater praise than this we could scarcely give a book. . . . . The chief actors command and rivet the author's attention, as they certainly will that of every intelligent reader of this robust and suggestive novel.'—*Daily News.*

'Mr Saunders employs a nervous diction which would make any work of fiction proceeding from his hand of value, even if no other merit could be ascribed to it. But his characters are just as forcible and concise. . . . He has produced a remarkable and powerful book.'—*Daily Telegraph.*

'Unquestionably it often attains to greatness. It is a book that stands broadly distinguished from the run of mere novels of the season. One feels instinctively that it would be a mistake to describe it as clever, or interesting, or well written. It is all these, but more—it bears the unmistakable stamp of genius.'—*Echo.*

'"Hirell," apart from its dramatic vigour and idyllic grace, abounds with life-like portraitures—some sketched with a vigour verging on coarseness, others dainty as a poet's dream. . . . The movement is vigorous and brisk, reminding one of the elastic tread of youth on mountain heather—the air, meanwhile, redolent with the fragrance of crushed herbs, and musical with the song of birds, and the sky suffused with ever-changing colours.'—*Illustrated London News.*

'Mr Saunders' conception of Cunliff's pure affection growing out of his guilty one shows him to be possessed of the poetic instinct which belongs only to the higher order of novelists.'—*Morning Advertiser.*

'On the whole, whether we regard the originality of the author's conception, his dramatic instinct, and his power of developing some of the strongest passions of the human breast, we must regard "Hirell" as a novel of extraordinary merit—one of those rare contributions to the circulating library over which the reader likes to linger, and to many whose chapters he will return with unsated appetite.'—*Morning Post.*

'It is, however, with Hirell, the heroine, that the author has taken most pains, with most success. There is no part of the

book more interesting than the description of Hirell's struggle between 'love and duty,' and the paling of the pure flame of her passion before the still purer sunlight of her faith. And this struggle is brought within the range of our mere human sympathies by the alloy of spiritual pride which helped her faith to conquer.'—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

3.—'ISRAEL MORT, OVERMAN,'

A Mining Story.

OPINIONS OF THE PRESS.

'Mr Saunders' book is more than a novel, though regarded in that light it possesses abundant interest; but as a narrative of the warfare carried on between man and nature in the bowels of the earth, this mining story is most powerful.'—*Athenæum.*

'Griffith Williams, the original proprietor of the mine in which Israel Mort works, and in which he secures an interest, is most skilfully portrayed; as, indeed, are all the typical characters of the Welsh mining village. . . . The tragic scenes which take place are painted with great force, and with a kind of pathetic realism; and reveal something of the rough, daring, reckless, yet essentially brave and true natures that are to be found among the Welsh miners, with their peculiar mixture of religious enthusiasm, sordid, thrifty worldliness, and occasional unscrupulousness.'—*British Quarterly Review.*

'It is unquestionably a powerful and striking novel; the leading character, repellant as he may be, is drawn with force, originality, and consistency: nor is there any lack of dramatic ability or effective situations. . . . There is quite excitement enough in the succession of separate incidents to carry the reader on in enjoyment from the beginning to the end.'—*Saturday Review.*

'Israel Mort himself is an exceptionally fine creation. . . . the more striking because of the dramatic contrast between the strength, patience, and energy of one who might have conquered and governed kingdoms, and its wretched distortion by sordid and narrow circumstances, into an almost sublime combination of tyranny and cunning.'—*Globe.*

'Israel—this particularly rough diamond. . . . who has steeled himself to the one purpose of "getting on," who has discarded all tenderness and affection as things in which for a time he must have no part. . . . Yet Israel is upright, true to his word and to those who trust him; but the world, he says, fights for money and place, and he fights too. . . . There are many excellences in the work on which we should like to dwell.'—*Graphic.*

'The figure of the Overman—a conception worthy of Balzac—seems to us as remarkable for a certain rough strength, a certain rude masterfulness, as anything of its kind we know.'—*London.*

'Conceived with no little power and originality. . . . Knowing how important to him is the stake in the game he has to play, we cannot withhold our admiration from the skill, courage, and constancy with which Israel plays it.'—*Times.*

'Mr Saunders has done admirably well a very good work in writing 'Israel Mort.' . . . The hero of the tale begins in a large and famous coal-mine as a little boy, and gradually rises step by step through the various grades of employment until he reaches that of overman and manager, and at last of joint owner. The story is told with great spirit, and in such vivid manner as could only result from the author's perfect acquaintance with all the dangers, sorrows, and privations of a miner's life.'—*Standard* (Two Notices).

'The dreadful scenes so graphically described in these volumes are not designed only to produce a passing sensation of horror in the reader's breast, but are used as means of displaying the emotions and passions of human nature in many varieties, and of giving action to some strongly-conceived character. First we have brought vividly before our imagination what a wonderful thing mining is. The intellect and force of will of man breaking into the storehouse of nature in search of treasures without which life could scarcely be endured, warmth and light; man fighting inch by inch with the forces of nature with arms captured from nature's self by the force of mind called science—here is occasion for a romance, and our author has not missed it.'—*Queen.*

'THE SHERLOCKS.'

'Although less sensational both in characters and incidents than "Israel Mort," "The Sherlocks" is in some respects a more powerfully conceived story. It prepares a series of surprises for the most experienced students of fiction, and yet there is knowledge of human nature as well as originality in its ingenious deceptions and apparent inconsistencies.

'Sherlock himself is really a noble character and very originally imagined. His outward appearance is much against him, and in that, as in some of his moral qualities, he greatly reminds us of "Tom Pinch." He has set his affections in a strange quarter, and was made, as it seems to us, a most unfortunate marriage. The well-meaning little man thinks himself highly flattered when he has been half contemptuously accepted by an overpowering widow, who means to continue to make use of him as she has made use of him before. Mrs Bannister is in some respects the counterpart of Old Mrs Bolton in "John Caldigate." She makes great profession of religion, and is perversely unchristian in her conduct. Once fairly in her clutches, we believe that Peter will be powerless. In reality, it is quite the reverse. Peter never wavers in his touching affection for his wife, as it pleases him to fancy her. He endows her with imaginary graces,

and delights to anticipate her every wish. We are inclined to agree with her and think him weak to folly. But a succession of circumstances chance to arise which appeal to his sense of right and his latent chivalry. He takes the part of the feeble and unprotected with a constancy of will that is not to be resisted, and in doing his best, regardless of the sacrifice of his comfort, he speedily begins to reap his reward. He has received two forlorn young women into his household; one of them the supposed niece of his wife, although she turns out subsequently to be that lady's daughter; the other the orphan child of a friend. He has to defend the former against his wife's dislike and tyranny, while the second involves him in more serious troubles. For the father of Pauline had died ruined while he was believed to be rich; he has made away with his daughter's fortune in wild speculations; and Peter, with rash impulsiveness, has pledged himself to keep the humiliating secret as long as he can. So we have an eminently straightforward man placed in the falsest of false positions; using his authority as Pauline's guardian apparently with the most perverse caprice, and abusing the respect he has inspired her with to conceal his actual motives. Of course it all comes right in the end, when the course of events brings about explanations; and then the lustre of Peter's character shines out in undimmed brilliancy, even warming the cold heart of his wife, and tardily winning him her affection. And there is a good deal of by-play going on in the way of love-making, as Peter's two sons and his wards are falling into and out of love with each other in what is a rather extraordinary game of cross-purposes. But the moral as well as the beauty of the novel is the irresistible influence of a fine and consistent character on the natures with which it is brought into contact, and Mr Saunders in a pleasant tale has conveyed an impressive lesson.'—*The Times.*

"LOVE'S MARTYRDOM."

A Play and Poem.

LETTERS TO THE AUTHOR.

(*Reprinted from the Book.*)

When Miss Hogarth and Miss Dickens were preparing for publication the 'Letters' of their illustrious relative, they did me the honour to inquire if I could aid them by contributions from his correspondence with me.

I said, in answer, I had received many letters from him (and some of them were very interesting and characteristic), but that through accident, they, with a great number of others that I highly valued, had been all swept away, with one exception—his letter relating to my play of 'Love's Martyrdom.' This I submitted to their judgment, to be used or not as they should think best. It consequently appeared, with some preliminary and necessary explanations from me, in their work.

In deciding upon its re-issue in the play, I thought, for various reasons, some of which will be sufficiently obvious, it was only right and advisable to print two other letters received during the same period, on the same subject; letters which, like Mr Dickens's, deeply influenced me; and have become so mingled with his in my thoughts ever since, that I must be pardoned if I do not feel inclined to divide them.

'TAVISTOCK HOUSE,
26th October 1854.

'DEAR SIR,—I have had much gratification and pleasure in the receipt of your obliging communication. Allow me to thank you for it, in the first place, with great cordiality.

'Although I cannot say that I came without any prepossessions to the perusal of your play (for I had favourable inclinings towards it before I began), I *can* say that I read it with the closest attention, and that it inspired me with a strong interest, and a genuine and high admiration. The parts that involved some of the greatest difficulties of your task appear to me those in which you shine most. I would particularly instance the end of Julia as a very striking example of this. The delicacy and beauty of her redemption from her weak, rash lover are very far indeed beyond the range of any ordinary dramatist, and display the true poetical strength.

'As your hopes now centre in Mr Phelps, and in seeing the child of your fancy on his stage, I will venture to point out to you—not only what I take to be very dangerous portions of "Love's Martyrdom" as it stands *for presentation on the stage;* but portions which I believe Mr Phelps will speedily regard in that light, when he sees it before him in the persons of live men and women on the wooden boards. Knowing him, I think he will be then as violently discouraged as he is now generously excited; and it may be useful to you to be prepared for the consideration of those passages.

'I do not regard it as a great stumbling-block, that the play of modern times best known to an audience * proceeds upon the main idea of this, namely, that there was a hunchback who, because of his infirmity, mistrusted himself. But it is certainly a grain in the balance when the balance is going the wrong way, and therefore should be most carefully minimised. The incident of the ring is too insignificant to look at over a row of gaslights, is difficult to convey to an audience, and the least thing will make it ludicrous. If it be so well done by Mr Phelps himself as to be otherwise than ludicrous, it will be disagreeable. If it be either it will be perilous, and doubly so because you revert to it. The quarrel scene between the two brothers in the third act is now so long, that the justification of blind passion and impetuosity—which can alone bear out Franklyn before the eyes of a great concourse of spectators, in plunging at the life of his own brother—is lost. That the two should be parted, and that Franklyn should again drive at him, and strike him, and then

* Sheridan Knowles' 'Hunchback.'

wound him, is a state of things to set the sympathy of the audience in the wrong direction, and turned from the man you make happy to the man you make unhappy. I would on no account allow the artist to appear attended by the picture more than once. All the most sudden inconsistency of Clarence I would soften down. Margaret must act much better than any actress I have ever seen if all her lines fall in pleasant places, therefore I think she needs compression too.

'All this applies solely to the theatre. If you revise the sheets for readers, will you note in the margin the broken laughter, and the appeals to the Deity? If, in summing them up, you find you meant them, I would leave them as they stand by all means; if not, I would blot accordingly.

'It is only in the hope of being slightly useful to you, by anticipating what I believe Mr Phelps will discover, or what, if he should pass it by, I have a strong conviction the audience will find out, that I have ventured on these few hints. Your concurreuce with them yourself, or re-consideration of your preference for the poem as it stands, cannot in the least affect my interest in your success. On the other hand, I have a perfect confidence in your not taking my misgivings ill; they arise solely out of my sincere desire for the triumph of your work.

'With renewed thanks for the pleasure you have given me.—I am, dear sir, faithfully yours, CHARLES DICKENS.'

'BATH, *August 5th.*

'MY DEAR SIR,—I think myself highly honoured by the letter you have sent me, and I feel myself enchanted by the book, "Love's Martyrdom."

'I know not what tragedy I may compare with it, among the best of those which divided in their day the world with Shakespeare. Indeed I estimate these much lower than is generally done. There is about them so much blood and . . . . These, no doubt, were highly gratifying to Elizabeth and her maids of honour, who also thought it proper their favourites should appear in stiff ruffs. Euphuism has sometimes stalked to please the court into the scenes of Shakespeare. But he knew when to keep it out, and did.

'To prove that I have read attentively your noble poem, I have taken the liberty you invite. I venture to blame nearly all inversions in poetry which are not equally admissible in prose.

'Permit me to name them. You are a master of metre, and should leave no verse defective.' [Here, and in subsequent parts of the letter, follow no less than twenty-one suggestions for the amendment of words and phrases, most of which are now incorporated in the text, and therefore omitted from the letter; as all, with but slight exceptions, would have been, but that some escaped my recollection till the first sheets had been printed off.]

'Throughout the whole drama I find, within inverted commas, passages worthy of Shakespeare,' instancing Franklyn's soliloquy, pages 8, 9, 'as worthy of Shakespeare, and very like his best.

'P. 10. Admirable—*Calmly, etc.*

'P. 24. *After many days, etc.* I would rather have written this than all the poems that have been written in my lifetime.

'P. 18. *So fair a school few scholars.* Noble scene.

'P. 63, 64. The song very like the finest in Beaumont and Fletcher.

'P. 69. Freelove's speech most eloquent.

'P. 76-82. *Act 2, Scene III.* The scene ends admirably.

'P. 87. *Oh, Heaven, etc.* Supremely grand.

'P. 108. *'Tis but a dream,* down to *Was she not all to me?* Never was surpassed in pathos.

'P. 144, 145. *Too well, etc.* This is true passion, the sublimity of pathos.

'I shall often turn to this noble work, which is among the few poems I have now time left for.—Believe me, my dear sir, your very obliged, W. S. LANDOR.'

The third letter—one to me of inestimable value—is unsigned, as the writer still lives.

. . . . . .

'*Sept. 15th*, 1854.

'DEAR SIR,—Though my eyes will scarcely allow me to read much, I have read your play, and though I cannot be considered as a good judge of how a play might tell in being acted, I think I may conscientiously congratulate our time in possessing in you a man of *true* dramatical genius.

'I intend to read it again, and reconsider it, but I do not suppose that I shall have any other verdict to deliver.

'You will pardon me for not answering sooner; and you will, I have no doubt, easily forgive me for not having done so. I have so many books of poems, etc., sent me, that not only have I no time to read them all, but some that I do look over, wearying me out of all "cess," make me sometimes undertake a new book with a sigh of exceeding weariness. From your book I really got refreshment and pleasure. May you go on and prosper.—Yours truly,

. . . . .

MISS VANDELEUR;

OR,

ROBBING PETER TO PAY PAUL.

MISS VANDELEUR;

OR,

ROBBING PETER TO PAY PAUL.

A NOVEL.

BY

JOHN SAUNDERS,

AUTHOR OF 'HIRELL; OR, LOVE BORN OF STRIFE,' 'ABEL DRAKE'S WIFE,' 'ISRAEL MORT, OVERMAN,' 'THE SHERLOCKS,' 'A NOBLE WIFE,' ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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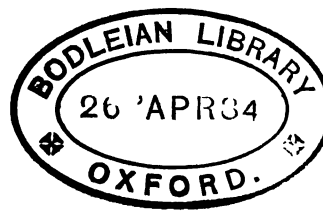

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CONTENTS.

PAGE

PREFACE, ... vii

CHAPTER I.

A NOVELTY IN MARCH DAYS, ... 1

CHAPTER II.

HARLAXTON HOUSE, MAYFAIR, . . . 4

CHAPTER III.

A PASSING GLIMPSE OF OUR CHIEF CHARACTERS, 12

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNTIMELY ILLNESS, ... 30

CHAPTER V.

THE COUNTESS'S ROOM, ... 36

CHAPTER VI.

THE DOCTOR'S FIAT, ... 44

CHAPTER VII.

KNOWING THE WORST, ... 56

CHAPTER VIII.

TITLES OF HONOUR, ... 61

PAGE

CHAPTER IX.

THE CABINET, ... 87

CHAPTER X.

THE DAWNING PLAN, ... 92

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST STEP, ... 107

CHAPTER XII.

THE EARL'S TEMPTATION, ... 117

CHAPTER XIII.

HE IS INNOCENT, ... 132

CHAPTER XIV.

DAYS OF LANGUOR, ... 137

CHAPTER XV.

'I AM BUT WHAT YOU HAVE MADE ME,' . . 146

CHAPTER XVI.

GENTLEMAN JACK GETS AN INSTALMENT FROM FORTUNE, ... 165

CHAPTER XVII.

MOMENTS OF DANGER, ... 174

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NEW USE FOR NATURAL HISTORY, . . . 181

CHAPTER XIX.

A COMPACT, ... 208

CHAPTER XX.

THE FANCY FAIR, ... 213

PREFACE.

I THINK it but right that I should here acknowledge gratefully the assistance I have received in all that relates to the hero's adventures in Ireland. These are a faithful reflection of the career of a living personage; who entered the army as a private, is now an officer of rank, and who has kindly given me the fullest details, while I was collecting my material in the sister island. This refers not only to the hero's experiences as a gentleman entering

the army through so humble a portal; but also to the principal events of the Fenian expedition that follow: modified of course by the literary necessities of my story; and especially by the fact that the hero—who passes through hardship so bravely—is one of England's 'gilded youth.'

MISS VANDELEUR.

CHAPTER I.

A NOVELTY IN MARCH DAYS.

THE winter of the year 18— was a most unconscionable one; taking possession, as it did, of a great part of autumn on the one side, and of spring on the other, and threatening the entire extinction of the latter, so far as the passing season was concerned.

But March came, and wonderful indeed was the change he wrought in a day or two. One might liken him to a florist to whom the Heavenly Gardener had confided the care of the flowers of the earth,

in preparation for some august holiday; who had in consequence gathered them together, and sedulously protected them, in order to take the time of east winds by day, and of black frosts by night, to pour them forth amid balmy breezes upon the world, while he stood by to see, as Chaucer says,—

'How all the Orient laugheth of the sight!'

Men who rarely ever spoke to each other stopped quite naturally to exchange congratulations in the London streets, sometimes under the shelter of umbrellas provided against the sleet and wind rather than in fear of rain. Dreary, blackened hedgerows became suddenly alive with tiny sparkling leaf-buds, which rushed out at the call of the sun like so many children in a squalid neighbourhood, crowding forth when the inspiriting strains of music are heard from passing holiday-makers, inviting all to follow their example.

Flowers sprang as by magic in every suburban garden. The hoarse cries of the

hawker, 'All a-growing and a-blowing!' was heard alike in well-to-do quarters, tempting buyers to his full baskets of lovely but tender blossoms (forced into rapid bloom to decay as quickly), and in the veriest back slums to which he or she carried violets or primroses. Surely there is here one of the most pathetic of combinations. The bringer and the people to whom they are brought, in all their dirt and rags, and homeless homes, and coarseness of face, word, and gesture on the one hand; and the flowers on the other, so pure, bright, fresh, fragrant, full of the very breath of heaven; and yet taken by the Pariahs of our State, in admiration, sympathy, and love, that are unable to express themselves except through grotesque forms, but are not the less true and intrinsically beautiful. If we may indeed thank God for flowers on our own account, still more should we thank Him in our heart of hearts for the blessings they bring to the poor, the ignorant, and the depraved.

CHAPTER II.

HARLAXTON HOUSE, MAYFAIR.

NO greater contrast to the homes just glanced at, or to the flowers which alone suit the tastes and pockets of their inmates, could well be presented than by Harlaxton House and its adornments on one of those same lovely March days.

The position of the mansion is peculiar and distinctive.

Amid the formidable and ever increasing piles and ranges of dwelling-houses devoted in our overgown metropolis to the use of the nobility, gentry, and commercial magnates, who may be roughly said to

constitute the fashionable world; dwellings splendid in aspect and cost, but commonplace for the most part in their splendour; it is refreshing to come upon some old residence of an aristocratic family; rich within, in the gathered art-wealth of centuries; but dull, possibly dingy, without, as seen over the walled-in courtyard; the whole saying so plainly to the showy parvenu erections crowding around,—

'Pray, good people, keep your distance!'

Harlaxton House is a residence of this kind; as uninviting outside as the home of many a Turkish Pasha; but so full within of all that the heart of man or woman can desire in comfort, luxury, and picturesque beauty of detail, that the greatest of Eastern potentates might well envy the fortunate possessors; even if he see that the harem at present consists only of an aged and widowed countess, and a young girl, an orphaned relative and heiress, who has come to reside with her, and her two sons, since the death of the

late earl, her husband, little more than a year ago.

The day on which our story opens has been anticipated as a memorable one in the family. The countess and the earl, her eldest son, give now their first formal dinner-party since the loss of their relative, to a few intimate friends; and hold a reception afterwards of the most brilliant character, considering the titular, political, and intellectual rank of those who have been invited, and among whom is a prince of the Royal blood.

Most of these anticipate with interest and sympathy the return to the fashionable fold of one conspicuous in former days as a leader of society; and esteemed in later ones for her kindness to young aspirants of either sex, and for her willingness to aid by purse and pen in any good work.

A long waggon stands before the outer gate filled with plants; the taller ones nodding to each other at every movement

of the soft breeze, as if whispering about the glory of the day which invests foliage and flowers with golden sheen.

Here the eye rests on slender palms in Oriental beauty of form; red-leaved and variegated dracænas, splendid in colour foliage; and acacias studed all over with tiny golden buttons of bloom; while there it is attracted by the arching and broadly waving fronds of a giant tree-fern, which overtops bushy camellias in full flower, red, white, striped, and rose-hued.

The florist's men are busy unloading, and have to throw off their coats, and put forth all their strength to lift some of the heavy weights, and carry them through the court-yard into the hall.

This presents a busy scene. Immense numbers of smaller plants, of the kinds most distinguished for beauty of leaf and blossom (the large and lovely snow-white, vase-shaped flowers of the Calla Æthiopica, gleaming wherever one looks), are closely packed against the sombre, armour-

clad walls, waiting till their larger brethren shall be first disposed of in pride of place, in the decoration of the hall and staircase, the saloon, and other apartments.

Servants in the elegant blue livery of the Harlaxtons are passing to and fro on the business of the evening; while two of their number, in waiting, stand idly gazing and gossiping with each other, in luxurious enjoyment of the bustle and activity all around, since they are not called upon to partake.

So they think. But vain are the hopes of man! Two of the florist's men, who have just come in, and are staggering under the burden of a grand palm, find it so task their strength, that one of them cries out suddenly,—

'I say, Bill, I must let go if you don't stop.'

'Easy, then!' responds the other, and they manage to let it down gently.

Aware that time presses, they look round for help; and, lo! the two lackeys.

'Lend a hand; there's good fellows,' says one of the men to the nearest servant; 'it's more than we can manage.'

The person addressed came, looked at the plant, looked at the two men, went slowly back to his comrade, said something to him, then both looked back, and laughed.

'There's a man and a brother for you!' exclaimed the florist's man, who had made the appeal.

'You a man and a brother of a gorgush creature like that!' said the other. 'I'm ashamed on you, Jem, so to mistake your proper spere. Why, he's a sort o' human bird o' Paradise.'

The lackeys heard, and again they laughed.

'Now, I look again,' remarked the previous speaker, 'he gives me the idea of a splendid tulip, as ull fall to pieces at the first puff of wind. Only look at his legs?'

The legs so commented on changed their position uncomfortably; the face of their owner reddened with anger, and he

turned as if not to hear. But this only made the next speaker raise his voice accordingly,—

'And his complexion! Not long for this world, Bill!'

'Think so? Then don't aggrevate his feelings meanwhile. Let us hope he may live long, and make the werry rainbows fade afore him!'

It was too much. The lackeys advanced threateningly; and the florist's men, with a laugh, confronted them with folded arms. Whether that silently insulting attitude would have provoked the servants to show their manhood, who shall say? for they lost or were spared the opportunity, through the entrance of a respectable-looking man in black—Mr Richards, the house steward, and master of the domestics. The first glimpse of him sent them both back with extraordinary rapidity, and at the same time changed their attitude; in an equally remarkable manner they became conspicuously busy.

'Are all the plants in from the courtyard?' he asked. He was answered in the affirmative. 'Then hurry with them to their places. I expect the countess here in a few minutes on a tour of inspection, to see that all is right.'

There was a large plant near where he stood. He called the florist's men to take it to a place in the hall, which he indicated to them. Then noticing the plant which had been the occasion for the recent quarrel, he told the two servants to take that to another part.

They hesitated, looked at the florist's men—who put their hands to their backs in an ironically sympathetic way—and seemed half inclined to refuse; but Richards' stern—

'What are you dawdling about?' was decisive. With great difficulty they lifted, and bore the plant to its place. But even that was not so hard to bear as the jeers and congratulations of the florist's men, when for a moment they had to pass near them.

CHAPTER III.

A PASSING GLIMPSE OF OUR CHIEF CHARACTERS.

QUICK work was now made in the clearance from the hall of the plants that were destined for other parts of the mansion; and hardly had the steward seen that all was ready for the countess, and gone away to tell her so, before a face emerged from behind the screen that stood before the entrance door; and after a cautious look round, and seeing no one, its owner entered, congratulating himself that he had at last 'dodged the flunkys.'

He looked as if he might have ex-

tended the scope of comment so far, as to own he had all his life been dodging the things most worth living for, such as character, health, comfort; and had been mulcted in heavy penalties for so doing.

He was apparently of about thirty-five years of age, but might be much younger; for all the marks were upon him of that kind of living which makes men prematurely old. The well-shaped face Nature had given him, had become bloated; his eyes, still bright, and revelling in a kind of rollicking humour, were bloodshot; and one of them was blackened as from a recent blow.

But the most remarkable thing about him was the grotesque contrast between his garb, and his demeanour. He wore a dress suit, so greasy, and so changed in colour, and so badly fitting, that the conclusion was irresistible—he must, under some special and possibly recent circumstances of necessity, have been driven to pick it up in some old clothes' shop, as

if nothing else had been available for his appearance here to-day.

His manner, however, negatived all such derogatory ideas, when he heard the voice of some one coming, and said to himself,—

'I'm in luck. Here comes my man.'

A moment after a young gentleman entered, whose handsome face darkened as he saw the new comer. He, however, smiled confidently as he advanced, bowed with some grace but more effusion, held out his hand, which the young gentleman appeared in no hurry to take, so he withdrew it, as if the circumstance only enhanced the pleasure he expected from the meeting.

But before there was time to speak to each other, the countess, preceded by the steward, came into the hall, and stood for a moment in surprise and displeasure, to see her second son, Stephen, in the company of such a man.

She has changed her weeds to-day for

the first time, for a robe of black velvet, trimmed with crape, and relieved by white crape at the wrists, a silver girdle, a Marie Stuart cap, also of black velvet and crape, with an edging of pearls—a garb that may unobtrusively remind callers she is still a mourner.

She moved towards the two men. This was a new pleasure for Stephen's visitor. He bowed as if he could kiss the very ground in a more than oriental worship of the great lady before him; then recovering his very erect posture, turned to Stephen as if to say by his looks,—

'Your mother? The countess? How proud I feel to meet her!'

But the look the countess gave as she silently measured him from head to feet was so haughty, scornful, and penetrating, it seemed to enter his very marrow; and the bland smiles with which he tried to confront her died out; while a something that might be shame, or might be anger

caused his face to change, and become still more unlovely in its blotches and varieties of purple and crimson hues.

'Stephen,' said the countess, as she turned to her son, 'I want to speak to you in my room before you go out to-day, when you have done with this—this—gentleman?'

'Quite correct, my lady!' interposed the person so spoken of. 'Among friends I am always Gentleman Jack!'

'And what among your enemies?' asked the countess.

'Oh, pardon—*that* they have not the courage to tell me;' and with this stroke the speaker recovered his audacity.

'And if,' interposed Stephen, 'he does himself make known his gentility and merit he has one excuse—how else is the world to know?'

Gentleman Jack laughed at the hit as if he really enjoyed it, before saying,—

'Witty, though severe. But I am used to him.'

Looking gravely, yet lovingly, in her son's face, the countess went away; Gentlemen Jack behaving very much as if he were strewing flowers in her path, but receiving no sign of any kind that she even noticed his obsequious courtesy.

'If ever Lucifer takes a wife there'll be no more talk of *his* pride if he takes her!' Such was Gentleman Jack's comment, but which certainly did not reach the ear of Stephen; whose first salutation when his mother had gone left it clear he needed no spur to his anger.

'What the devil do you want?'

Want! Why, of course, I want my friend;' was the response, accompanied with a look and gesture of surprise, and tender reproach at the question.

'Didn't I warn you never to come here?'

'You did; but the magnetic attraction of friendship was too much for me.'

'And now you are here, what in the devil's name do you want?'

'Taking the question as if put more politely, I want to know why you come no more to the old haunts—have ceased to use me, and once at least have cut me dead in the street?'

'Is knowledge on these matters your only object in this visit?'

'Ah, there you touch my tenderest point. In losing my friend, even for a time, I seem to lose everything I hold most dear. Since we last met I have been descending the social incline, not by steps, but by a slide at a tremendous pace. Think of it. A gentleman born and bred when starting at the top; a common billiard marker at a gambling table, by the time I reached the bottom!'

'But that, I believe, is not an unprofitable vocation,' remarked Stephen. 'There are nice pickings attached to it.'

'A very just observation. And you can now feel what I feel in saying, I have lost it!'

'How did that happen?'

'Oh, as usual. I was too much the gentleman!' The speaker was so moved that he found it necessary to wipe the tears (or the rheum) from his eyes with a red silk rag, that still did duty as a handkerchief.

'Turn, then, to something else,' said Stephen with sharp decision; while seeming inclined to obey his own precept, by going away.

'How you do anticipate my wisest conclusions! That is just what I said to my landlady (and washerwoman) only two hours ago, when I returned from a jolly night's spree at a ball; and after an unlucky tumble in the gutter on my way home, which has ruined my best suit. Well, I was just about to take my rest in my lonely bed, when in comes my landlady (and washerwoman) to say her rent could no longer be put off; that my bill was very heavy—it certainly is long' —(and therewith he unrolled it, showing a series of weekly bills he had pinned

together), 'and that it must be paid this very day! What I felt for the poor woman, when obliged to own I hadn't just then a shilling in the world, is not to be told.'

'Didn't she tell you?'

'She did, by passing through every degree of the female barometer within the next half-hour; beginning with stormy, then drenching us both with very heavy tearful rain, and rising at last to a perfect hysteric tornado!'

Stephen struggled hard to keep down a laugh, but Jack had been too much for him, and he could only say,—

'And then?'

'I tried philosophically to show, as a passing consolation, that such tears were like delicious rains that came but to *enrich* the soil; and generally, that all such human commotions cleared and sweetened the atmosphere.'

'And then?' once more queried Stephen, his face telling Gentlemen Jack that he

was rapidly making way to the restoration of the old feeling between them.

'Don't ask! I had to run for my life, leaving all my worldly goods behind! In this dress too! That's woman all over. The bouquet of kindness you offer, turns on you like a bunch of stinging nettles. How I do wish they'd invent a third sex, that might answer all the necessary purposes of that one. It must be an improvement.'

'Well, Jack, you have made me laugh in the old fashion; but I am afraid I can't return the compliment.'

'You will! All in good time. But come. I want counsel. I want advice. Here's the case. Nature places every man betwixt two bundles of hay, called Timid Respectability and Bold Adventure. Now I am the very ass to stand wistfully looking at and longing for both, and getting a bellyful from neither.'

Suiting the action to the word, he turned out his pockets.

'Empty! Empty! Empty! What am I to do?'

'Fill 'em! Fill 'em! Fill 'em! What are you to do, indeed! Anything you can that's honest, and that will enable you to earn a little to go on with. And then what a career is before you!'

'Indeed!' exclaimed Gentleman Jack, thinking his *plant* was coming to flower at last.

'Certainly,' said Stephen. 'You have only to go back to the simplicities of nature. Turn teetotaller as regards your tipple; and vegetarian that you mayn't want meat. You can laugh at house-rent and taxes from a Diogenes' tub; and can pleasantly regard the tailor, as you return to the primitive wardrobe of Eden in dress.'

'Delightful! Quite an idyll in prose! I'll think of it. You laugh, but I really will,' so said Jack, as he turned and took a rapid survey of the place to see that no one was within earshot. Then ap-

proaching Stephen in a confidential manner, he began to speak in a kind of half-whisper, to which his thick voice did not very well lend itself. 'Now, to show you I didn't come here empty-handed: That pretty girl at Richmond you so much admired—'

Stephen shook his head, and endeavoured to arrest the stream of communication by saying,—

'Excuse me, I must resume my exercise,' and then began to walk about. But he was followed, and still the insidious current poured into his ear,—

'I have found out where she lives, and spoken to her. She's wonderfully pretty; and, poor thing, has nobody to look after her. She's over head and ears in love with you—*that* she could not hide. Hers is a hard life, I suspect. Why not treat her one night to the play; and if, accidentally, you should be too late for the train—'

There the speaker paused, and again looked round. He was at the moment stand-

ing between Stephen and a window with glass doors opening nearly to the floor, which had been thrown back while the hall was swept. Stephen had stopped, as if yielding to the seductive tempter; who before pressing his advantage to a conclusion, again turned to make sure no one was likely to overhear or disturb them. And thus standing, Stephen whispered in his ear, to the listener's great gratification.

'You did not, as you say, come empty-handed; neither will I be empty-handed in rewarding you. Take this.'

'In an instant Gentleman Jack's elbows were caught from behind, in a sudden, powerful, and irresistible grasp, and he was hurried, without the possibility of a stop, right on to the low sill of the window, where he caught with both hands against the lintels, and so prevented his being pitched out.

'Sir! sir! sir!' he called out.

'What's the matter?' asked Stephen, still maintaining his vigorous thrust.

'Fifty feet below, and not even a dung-heap to break the fall!'

'Not five, upon my honour, and steps to go down!' cried Stephen; his indignation merging into a hearty fit of laughter, which he could no longer control. 'O Jack! Jack!' Stephen then let him go, and retired a little before again speaking. 'Take warning, or the farce of to-day may become the tragedy of to-morrow. Hush! the earl, my brother, is coming.'

'Shall I run out for a bit?' asked Gentleman Jack.

'No!' said Stephen, with sharp decisive tone, as he rang a bell; while his companion retired to a corner, and became lost in contemplation of a statue.

Lord Harlaxton entered, a man some thirty years of age, with well-formed features, long hanging brown whiskers, a curiously cold-looking, suspicious eye, tall figure, and imposing presence, when he kept down a certain restlessness of tem-

perament which is apt to impair personal dignity if it become habitual.

'Stephen,' he said, with something imperious in the manner and tone.

'Well,' responded Stephen, with cool indifference.

'Do you know there has been a man outside asking for you? I think without exception the most disreputable looking—'

'Is that him?' said Stephen, pointing with his finger towards Gentleman Jack.

Lord Harlaxton turned, put his glass to his eye, and said,—

'Yes, that's the man, who tells me he is a friend of yours.'

'Certainly,' responded Stephen. 'Jack, sit down.' The servant now came to answer the bell. 'Wine and a couple of glasses. Perhaps Lord Harlaxton will join us, so bring three.'

The gentleman so referred to did not wait till the servant was out of hearing, but at once responded in the iciest of

tones, and without the slightest perturbation of manner,—

'Lord Harlaxton declines the privilege you offer him, and will take an early opportunity of discussing your right to receive such "friends" in this house.'

As he was moving away, Gentleman Jack advanced, and arresting him, said,—

'I sincerely beg your lordship's pardon for being so shabby and disreputable looking, but I assure you I have not the slightest objection to being made rich, and presentable.'

The servant now entered, and Stephen slowly filled the two glasses, waiting for the man's departure. As he left, Stephen, thinking perhaps of the habits of the society in which his 'friend' lived, or perhaps simply making an occasion to retort one insult by another, said,—

'Jack, your health! Brother, yours!'

Lord Harlaxton had been standing since Gentleman Jack had spoken to him, immoveable; looking from one to

the other of the pair before him as if he were a social philosopher, studying the habits of some remarkable and, to him, new species.

'I see now,' he said; 'you are true friends, and well matched. To avoid invidious distinctions, therefore, I have the honour to wish you both good morning.'

And therewith the earl left them.

'Are you content?' asked Stephen. 'You have put me in for a jolly row.'

'I'm sorry, but—'

Gentleman Jack was interrupted by Stephen, who said, hurriedly,—

'My mother returns. You can wait no longer.'

'But I have something particular to say to you.'

'Another time.'

'It must be now.'

'Must?'

And Stephen sternly repeated the word. But seeing his look was confronted boldly

by Gentleman Jack, and that in a moment more his mother would again find them together and demand explanations, he said,—

'Wait then in this room for a few minutes. If I can return to you I will. If I do not, the meeting must be postponed. That is all I have to say.'

Gentleman Jack was again about to speak, but Stephen went to and opened the door of an apartment where the visitor would not be noticed. The two there separated, and left the hall in time to avoid the countess, who entered with the steward a moment later.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNTIMELY ILLNESS.

'IT is all very charming, my good Richards. I see nothing to alter or improve. On the contrary, it appears to me you are not content with fulfilling my wishes, but you go beyond them. I thank you.'

So said the countess, even while her face was pale, her form languid, her step hesitating and unsafe, through the unwonted fatigue and excitement of the day. Richards noted the change, and could not but observe,—

'I fear your ladyship is doing too much.'

'I do feel tired! Faint! A chair!'

As he brought it, and she sat down in evident alarm, she cried almost passionately,—

'Air! air! There seems none in the place!'

'The window is wide open, my lady. I will also open the hall door.'

'That should give me new life,' she said faintly, as she felt the draught of sweet air thus produced.

It revived her; and rising and taking the steward's arm, she slowly withdrew to her own favourite room, telling Richards to say nothing to anyone about this passing attack; and to make excuses for her, if necessary, to Mr Stephen, to prevent his coming till she should be quite recovered.

A few minutes after, while the two servants-in-waiting were engaged in a hot discussion as to the best horse for betting on in a coming race, the countess's bell was rung.

One of the footmen moved leisurely a

few steps to answer it, but returned to give his companion a strong warning against the horse he had chosen; but started as if electrified by the renewed sounds of the bell, pulled with great and inexplicable violence, as if it was indeed the countess who summoned.

As he hurries up the staircase, the bell sounds once more, and so clamorously that his fellow-servant-in-waiting shuts up his betting book, forgets his favourite horse and his many speculative bets upon it, and rushes up after his comrade; while the other servants, and the florist's men, who had been hospitably treated, came flocking in to see what was the matter.

Presently Richards, a grave-faced man at all times, but looking now as if he had just been in communion with a ghost, comes from the countess; slowly descending the stairs (he is a man who never does anything fast, even to run from danger to himself, which he must have time to realise), and standing on

the bottom step, beckons to those of the florist's men who are near, and says to them, as if the matter were of no sort of consequence so far as they were concerned,—

'The countess is ill. I am going to countermand the invitations. Take back everything you have brought, without a moment's loss of time. Our people will help.'

Waiting only till he saw 'our people' were helping with might and main, he withdrew to execute his task; an embarrassing and difficult one to the last degree, considering the shortness of the notice, the quality of the invited guests, and the distances to be gone over by his messengers—who comprised pretty well every male servant of the family in and out of the house who could readily be found.

The two lackeys, who had in succession gone to answer the bell, now met in the hall.

'I'm off for the doctor!' whispered one.

'And I for the lawyer!' said the other, Jeames the servant, whose legs and complexion had been so appreciatingly dealt with.

And then, as if he could not, even under such circumstances, repress the joke he was big with, on account of the disappointment in store for the guests, he added, putting his mouth to the listener's ear,—

'I'm to go from the lawyer's to the Duke of Doddington's!' This was Jeames' pleasant way of satirising the habits of the Duke of Doddington: 'I'm to put him off. He won't like it, will he?—eh? He seldom comes out now —too old — but when he says he will come, he don't understand being told he mustn't! Eh? And when he does, it's such fun to see how he looks down at his feet to know where they are going! And he's obliged to take my arm to make sure he and they ain't going to part company. Ha! ha! ha! Stupid

old duffer! He has never once tipped me for all the harm I've kept him out of. Well, anyhow he won't be here to-night!'

And with that note of exultation Jeames and his comrade went to fulfil the commission entrusted to them.

CHAPTER V.

THE COUNTESS'S ROOM.

WHATEVER wealth and luxury, inspired and chastened by a singularly refined taste, could do to enhance the beauty and dignity of the principal apartments of Harlaxton House certainly has been done; but to see their effect in culmination one must be privileged to visit the countess's room; for so she chose to have the place called where she had been accustomed to spend the greater part of every day.

The walls of white and gold are divided into compartments of varying size and form by continuous foliage, whose natural tint

and character, chosen in both respects for their delicacy and sportive grace, lend an indescribable charm to the whole before one has time to note the gems of water-colour painting they enclose ; all evidently from true master hands, who see decoration in all art, but art also in all decoration.

The upper spaces are devoted to single figures or simple groups, selected, with admirable discrimination as to their fitness for pictorial display, from the works of the great poets of all ages ; beginning with the Nausicaa of Homer, and ending with the Lady of Shalott of Tennyson.

Harmoniously interspersed among these are flowers ; mostly one flower alone with its foliage, the latter so mingling with the foliage that shapes the compartments that you cannot tell where the one ends and the other begins. Presently you become aware that no flower is repeated ; and following upon that discovery comes another, that no tropical or florist's flowers of any kind are among them, but that all the

lovely and varying blossoms we see are genuine British wild flowers; a constellation of native, earth-born stars, each one differing from the rest in glory. Strangers can scarcely believe the statement of their indigenous origin, till assured that every-one of them was copied, and faithfully copied, from living specimens drawn from forest, field, or moorland, bog or marsh, mountain or valley, ravine, water-course, or river margin, on the Harlaxton estates in England, Wales and Ireland.

A trait of the countess's pride is told in relation to one or two of these flowers, which no search could discover on her own domains, and which the artist-in-chief was solicitous to obtain elsewhere. The countess in answer said,—

'When I think of all I have got, I can but also reflect it is good to be reminded of what is denied to me. It is a salutary lesson, my friend. Leave it so.'

But it is to the larger of the compartments that our attention is chiefly and per-

force due: the ones occupying the centre of the panels, and displaying their wealth at the level of the eye. These are devoted to a series of exquisite paintings, lightly but unerringly touched and tinted, completely illustrative of Milton's Penseroso. Did the lady who commissioned these works long ago divine in her secret soul the sorrows of the future, and provide for them appropriate food in this sweet, sad work of Poet and Painter? Did she even then feel a foretaste of to-day?

In this room she sits now, like a black statue amid these fair surroundings; motionless, except when touching, from time to time, through an acquired, but unconscious habit, a magnificent ruby heart, encrusted with diamonds, which she ever wears upon her breast in memory of a lost sister. Meanwhile her eyes are fixed upon the door, as if she half put to that the questions and momentous issue she is continually repeating in thought to herself concerning the doctor,—

'When will he come? What will he say to me?'

Let me take the opportunity of the brief delay to try to describe her.

The noble outline of feature and the dignity of personal bearing which we are accustomed to associate with high birth and breeding, and to a certain extent rightly, but often very wrongly, are the first traits to arrest the eye as it lights on the Countess of Harlaxton.

But even as one admires them they are soon overlooked or forgotten altogether in still more interesting features, that are so subtle in themselves, and so liable to change and melt one into another as to perplex an observer who tries to come to any settled conclusions. The softness and playful mobility of the mood of one hour or day, the tenderness and fixed melancholy of that of the next, are at times so impressive as to make it difficult afterwards to realise the strong will, the unchanging purpose, discoverable in the set

of the delicately eloquent mouth; or the irritable pride that at the first suspicion of offence expands the nostril, and erects and sends back the head in haughty suspense to wait for explanation or apology.

Time has dealt with her in capricious fashion, has turned her once beauteous brown hair to silvery white, forgetting she is yet but fifty-six; and made the thin, pale, graceful countenance tell the same false tale of advanced age, perhaps in excuse of the cruelty of his meditated premature doom.

And then, the dread potentate, as if charmed with his own work, seems to have sought ceaselessly to beautify all he was about to destroy. Though the pale cheek knows no more the flush of the olden and sweet colour, once lovely as that of the fairest rose in her garden; though the blue eyes retain no longer the sparkle, the infinite ideal depths, and the all-confiding trustfulness that once characterised them, and made it a delight to

gaze on them while only seeming to listen to what the lips might be saying,—time compensates for these losses by the increased and increasing glow of a loving spirit, shining through every glance and lineament in those periods—unhappily too few!—when their owner can listen, and yield herself to the Destroyer's words of comfort: —'Some brief periods of happiness are still vouchsafed to you. Take them, and enjoy!'

A caged bird, enclosed in a bower of ferns that fill a shady window at the further end of the room, calls to her for the accustomed delicacy, a lump of sugar, from those slender jewelled hands; but calls in vain to one who is practically dead to all else in the world but the momentous fiat she may be about to hear, and the scarcely less momentous duty and consequences to follow if her worst fears are realised.

A tiny, fairy-like terrier, a sort of animated gem in black and tan—so diminutive is it, and so beautiful—suddenly leaps into her lap; and for the first time is the

little creature shaken off, but without anger as without care, while its mistress, no longer able to restrain her impatient anguish, rises to open the door, and look out, and listen if she can hear and distinguish, through the ceaseless bustle of the hall, the doctor's peculiar and heavily-planted footsteps advancing.

Disappointed, she returns to her chair, leans her head against the back, covers her face with a handkerchief, and passes through a few minutes of such distress as makes her slender frame quiver like a reed in the storm, but which again passes away in the consciousness of recovered mental strength and fortitude.

'Hark!' Yes, she hears the doctor's well-known cheery voice and patronising tone on the staircase. She draws breath, as one does in the fear of losing it altogether, and then summoning up her every faculty in aid she awaits in seeming calm his presence, merely ejaculating,—

'Now! Now!'

CHAPTER VI.

THE DOCTOR'S FIAT.

OF course this gentleman had noticed on his way in the strange exodus of the plants and the florist's men on their way out, and could neither misunderstand the reason nor the danger indicated.

But Dr Baxter was a confirmed soother, and maker of things pleasant, under the unlikeliest conditions. So avoiding all reference to the countermand that had changed so suddenly the character of the day, and ignoring the urgent nature of the message sent to himself, he chose to treat the matter as one of those calls

he was accustomed to make to Harlaxton House, sometimes with invitation, sometimes without; while, under cover of this mask, he took his own measures to learn the actual truth.

'So we do not feel so well to-day? Resuming the cares of the world a little too soon? But the intention was good, and the instinct that prompted it not so far wrong, perhaps, after all. But we shall see. We shall see. Meanwhile, allow me to congratulate your ladyship on your good looks. You certainly are looking better than when I last saw you. Really, much better!'

There was not much in the words, but the tones, gestures, and aspect with which they were accompanied gave them a peculiar significance. The doctor was a fine, handsome, portly man of forty, marked out by Nature to be a fashionable and popular physician; but who in return really did study to become a sound and trustworthy guide, by daily and nightly

communion with Nature, in all that related to his vocation. And he had his reward, as all will have who trust that great, liberal mother. Able in most branches of medical science, he became distinguished in one direction, that of diseases of the heart, on which subject his book is yet the best.

But, as has been already indicated, he had one foible—a belief in the personal management of his patients, which assumed the character of quite a fatherly interest; pleasant and natural in many cases, but ludicrous in dealing with a lady who looked old enough to be his mother.

The countess said nothing for some time, except in answering his questions, which she did briefly but carefully, for she knew the doctor better than he knew himself; and was quite conscious that below his manner, which sadly jarred, there was a shrewdly observant eye and mind at work worthy of all respect.

When he had felt her pulse, which he

retained unusually long, but, as if accidentally, while plying her with queries; and when all these had been answered, and he had let her arm go, his face, which the countess had fancied to grow serious, became for a second or two illumined as he said cheerily,—

'I find matters very much as usual. I think I can send you something to deal with those symptoms you think new. I will see your ladyship again to-morrow, and I expect to find you quite what you could wish—and—expect. There, now, take a good night's rest, and to obtain that keep an easy mind!' Omitting to pat her on the cheek, as his manner might almost have suggested he would do, and contenting himself with patting her hand instead, he was about to take his leave, and think over secretly to himself all he had learned, when she brought him in a moment to a standstill by a few words, stern and abrupt,—

'Is that all you have to say? Then it

is time for me to speak. Do you know that I have countermanded the dinner, and the reception of to-night?'

'Yes; at least I judged so from what I saw.'

'Am I one to do that for any small occasion?'

'I—I certainly think not, your ladyship.'

'And yet if I am to believe you, all will be so well with me to-morrow that I can have no excuse for such treatment of the intended guests.'

The doctor, greatly embarrassed, and wondering how to extricate himself creditably, was about to speak, but she arrested him with an imperious gesture.

'Stay! Think you I cannot see how you beat about the bush while, after all, the victim is but too ready to come forth? Dr Baxter, I believe I am dying, while you seek to amuse me with deluding and mischievous hopes.'

'Good God! what can induce you so to speak?'

'I too—in cowardly fear—have been following your example. I told you I was ill last night. But I did not tell you that I was in fact dying—so it seemed—many times over. I could find no pulse. A deadly faintness came over me. I went off. In a little time, how long I cannot exactly say, but I think within a few minutes, I recovered sufficiently to drink a few drops of wine that happened to be in a glass near my hand. How I spent the next hour God alone can tell you, for I was not even able to call for help when conscious, and most of the time I must have been quite unconscious.'

The doctor's face was now telling only too plainly what he thought and felt. Seeing this the countess hastened to say,—

'Forgive me, my dear doctor, if I have spoken unjustly, but let us dismiss words, and come to facts. Can you tell me, putting together all you knew before, with all I have told you now, what is the real

state of things?—in a word, what is the disorder or disease that afflicts me, and which yet allows me at times to forget so long its existence, and to dream of recovery and health—such health, I mean, as an aged woman may reasonably hope for?'

'Your ladyship, I think, told me you were but fifty-six!' said the doctor, still trying to gain time for his own thoughts before he answered her.

'Will you now be so good as to answer me, when I tell you that even your delay may prove momentous, and full of evil consequence?'

Thus brought to the stake, and with no escape but through honest confession, Dr Baxter said he feared there was heart disease.

Unconsciously the countess's hands went to her heaving breast, for she now knew all—she *was* what she had long feared. She did not again speak for a little while, and the doctor was silent too.

Presently, with returning fortitude, she continued,—

'I fear no danger—even that which you have indicated—so much as I fear mistakes. Tell me, then, in the simplest but most absolutely true words, how I stand? — supposing I have matters to arrange which must be arranged before —before I die—even if my last breath and strength have to be given to them.'

'I will answer you, to the best of my ability, and with absolute frankness,' responded the doctor.

His words, and the deep concern—almost the agitation — of his tone and looks, so moved the countess, that she took his hand and kissed it, and said,—

'That is well. I will try to deserve your kindness as—as you would wish—in making the best of things.'

A faint smile passed over her face, and then died out in deeper gloom, now that she felt sure the doctor would hesitate no longer but speak plainly.

'My dear countess, suppose then we take the worst aspect first?'

'Yes,' she responded, drawing her breath, and letting it exhale in an imperceptible sigh.

'Candidly, then, I should advise you to lose no time in arranging the affairs you speak of.'

'You would begin to-day?'

'This hour, if there is no particular objection.'

'Ah, yes, I understand!'

'I do not conceal from you there is danger, which may or may not be imminent; but, on the other hand, I have had cases like yours where the patient was going to die every day of her life for many years, if only I would have let her think so; but as I wouldn't, and as I made her shape her life accordingly, she got on so well as to reach quite a respectable patriarchal age.'

Before he got to the end of this the countess's thoughts were far away, as he

now found by her putting to him a crucial question, which he felt to be a cruel one,—

'I draw from what you have told me the conclusion that I am not absolutely sure even of an hour, much less of a day, or several days. Is that so?'

'There can be no absolute certainty on such a matter,' said the doctor.

'Yet I want no less!' responded the countess passionately. 'I must have it! Ay, even if I pay a heavy price! Think, I beseech you, how to give me that!'

The doctor became uncomfortable, fidgety, and for a few seconds bent low his head, as in meditation, towards the ground. Supposing he hesitated, she began to urge in warmer, almost resentful terms,—

'It is of infinite consequence to me! Death itself is not the only thing to be thought of, but the *how* we die. I cannot die in peace without a duty performed, which, were it performed, might, if your patient's case be an example, enable me

instead to live in peace. Oh! think, my good kind doctor—think of that!'

'What do you wish?' he asked, raising his head and eyes to the pleader's face.

'Some resource, such as your skill and knowledge surely can command, by which I may be reasonably certain (you see I use no more wild words, and pray God to put all such to the account of my great trouble), reasonably certain that this day at least shall be mine.'

'I will do that if I can.'

'But you think you can?'

'Yes, there is a medicine not absolutely inadmissible in such a case, which, I believe, will practically secure what you want; but I am bound to warn you that it endangers to some degree your subsequent state.'

'You mean—'

'That under any other circumstances you would be better without it,' said the doctor bluntly.

'How soon can I have it?'

The doctor looked at his watch.

'It is now half-past eleven. By a quarter or ten minutes to twelve I will myself leave it at the door, with precise directions how far and no further you may go in its use.'

And almost before the countess was aware he was going, he had gone.

CHAPTER VII.

KNOWING THE WORST.

WITH the doctor's departure went also the necessity the countess had felt for self-control, while she learned the worst, and how to shape her course accordingly. The former she now knew, and was for the moment in no state to think of the latter.

Left to herself she could not but give way in bitter, sobbing anguish to what she felt her doom. It was not simple depression and despair, but an utter collapse of every faculty.

For a single moment all the glory of the world she was about to lose, came

back to her from the days of her youth, invested with the added charms that sprang from a larger experience. Youth, maturity, and age seemed to contend in rivalry, which should make life appear most sweet and precious to her, before making her a bankrupt in that court, where God alone gives the certificate saving honour. But that moment passed, a despair blacker than any midnight filled her soul.

The doctor's loud ringing at the gate, presently followed by a servant's appearance with the medicine, warned her of what she was doing.

'This is madness!' she murmured to herself. Then she held the phial up to the light, and looked at it for some time, till, indeed, she forgot she was looking at it; while her thoughts reverted to the solemn duties of the hour, and glanced over the history of the sad and humiliating past, in order to satisfy herself once more that these duties were as necessary as they

seemed inexorable. But thus thinking, her mind regained something of its natural calm, and began to shape them into fitting action.

Consciously feeling better, she questioned for a moment whether she would take the draught at once, or wait. The answer was prompt—she drank.

And then the native strength of her spirit, aided possibly by the doctor's contribution, shone out in marvellous clearness of intellect, and unhesitating dignity of will. She rose to the height of the position, however terrible; and began to move with a thoughtfulness as to details, and a directness as to her ends, worthy of all regard. She rang, and was answered by the steward, who was still busy despatching the notes of countermand in an adjoining room, and brought forgetfully a handful with him.

Cutting short his explanations how the footmen and the whole staff of the household were abroad, she said,—

'Tell me, Richards, has my son returned?'

'The earl has just passed through the hall to his room, my lady.'

'My son Stephen. Surely I said so!'

'Oh no, my lady. I beg your pardon, but you only said,—Has my son returned?'

'You are very precise. Has he come back?'

'Yes, and went a few minutes ago with Miss Vandeleur into the saloon, where the young lady has been decorating the walls with flowers.'

'That is well. Then they do not yet know of my illness, or the countermand?'

'No, my lady.'

'You will oblige me by taking your letters to the little room opposite to the door of the saloon, to prevent, if you quietly can, any alarm being given to them about me until after the lawyer has been. When Mr Lynx goes you can tell them, unless Lord Harlaxton should

be with me. In that case wait until I am alone.'

'I will take care, my lady.'

As Richards left his mistress she began to remind herself how she must forget, and even if necessary tread down, self; how she must wrestle with pain, whether of soul or body, when it *would* come, so that she might not in those dark—dark hours commit some irreparable damage to the interests and persons dear to her. She could but sum up all into one last pathetic plaint:

'One day only I dare rely on! One day only for all I have to do! Oh, my son! My son!'

CHAPTER VIII.

TITLES OF HONOUR.

MEANTIME there was one part of the mansion, comprising the conservatory and the saloon, which was also the billiard-room, into which no sign of sound had yet penetrated that could suggest to the inmates the tragic issues pending elsewhere, and the abrupt stop put to the evening reception in consequence.

One need not therefore wonder to hear, when the door of the room is for a moment opened, the sweet silvery bubbling and exuberant laughter of a happy-hearted maiden, falling upon the ear as light and

refreshingly as the waters of a fountain dancing in the summer sun.

Interpenetrating this mirth, comes occasionally and briefly the deeper ha! ha! of a male voice harmoniously mingling: the first belongs to Miss Frances Vandeleur; the last to Stephen.

As we look in upon them, a pretty scene meets the eye. The walls, windows, cornice, and chandelier of the billiard-room are wreathed and garlanded with green and variegated ivies; while the wall at the farther end is pierced by three graceful arches, a tall centre one, and a smaller one at each side. Through these (the doors having been removed for the occasion) the eye ranges in delight along the vista of the conservatory, which appears here in its extreme length, full of the choicest and rarest flowers known to the horticultural world. Baskets, pendant from the roof, and so profuse in their floral wealth that their luxuriance threatens inconvenience to tall passers-by, alternate with transparent,

fairy-like globes, that were to-night to have shed their soft splendour on the captivating scene, but which will then share the darkness of all around them.

Turning to the wall behind us, we are for a moment subjected to a charming illusion —the extension of the conservatory through a similar series of arches, and a far-reaching floral vista corresponding with the opposite end of the room, but which is only the reflection of the latter from a large mirror.

Miss Vandeleur, a figure of medium height, and exquisitely-rounded form, as the plain, close-fitting, light-blue dress makes apparent, is passing to and from the conservatory with a small basket on her arm, fetching flowers to 'light up,' as she says, the 'wilderness of foliage,' left by the servants, and with which they have been content. A step-ladder, with a hand-rail, covered in red cloth, facilitates her operations, when she cannot otherwise reach.

Stephen, meanwhile, is idly leaning against the billiard-table in the centre of

the saloon, with his hands in his pockets, his only occupation being to watch the operations of his companion, but one with which he seems perfectly content.

'Pray, sir, aren't you going to help me to put a soul into all this lifeless greenery?' she asks him.

'How?'

'Why, by flowers; which I am sure must be the souls of plants made visible. Goodness gracious! Stephen, if all our souls were likewise made visible, I wonder how we should come off!'

'Ah, that would be a revelation for some of us!'

'Once more, are you going to help? Look at the lovely things waiting to shed their light and influence on the great world of society to-night through your handiwork! Look!' she said, showing her basket.

'Really, I don't feel equal to so grand a vocation,' was the response.

'What then are you going to do?'

'Amuse myself in accordance with my humbler capacity.' And therewith Stephen took a cue and chalked the tip, while she ascended the step-ladder and began to place the flowers. 'All men, I suppose, have their ambition. And I have mine,' added Stephen, as he rolled the balls on to the table.

'And that is—'

'To make six successive and successful strokes off the spot. I did one day reach five, but generally my failures are humiliating. 'Here goes!' but so did not the ball into the pocket when he struck.

Miss Vandeleur, laughing, said,—

'I'm so glad—I mean so sorry! Try again.'

He does try, but though once more reaching five, he still fails; gets, or pretends to get, a little angry, and explodes, to the great amusement of his companion; who ironically exhorts him to persevere, which he shows her by a look of humorous

defiance is just what he means to do—and does, at intervals, through the subsequent dialogue.

'Pray, young lady,' says Stephen, pausing after another failure at the ignoble point of two, 'do you know that my mother expressly forbade any pillage from the conservatory?'

'No, I don't know, and just now I don't want to know. But be sure you tell me when I have quite done. Besides, I'm only robbing Peter to pay Paul!'

'Did you ever submit to be Peter, and to be robbed?'

'No.'

'I have. And as I find that Paul generally objects to being robbed in his turn, I too object on behalf of myself and the flowers.'

'Ah, but they are so charming! Look! Only look at these clusters of white and scarlet Bouvardias I have just put up,' she said, standing on the top of the step-ladder.

Stephen did look, and with interest, as he ejaculated,—

'Charming, indeed!'

'Foolish fellow! I didn't ask you to look at me, but at these, *these*,' she said with comic emphasis, as she tapped the flowers.

'Can't I choose?'

'Certainly not!'

'Perhaps you are right!' rejoined Stephen, with a half-sigh, or pretence at one.

'I am always right; or, if not, I expect to be always thought so, which does equally well.' And with a fresh burst of laughter she bade him go on with his failures, till she wanted him by-and-by to count her successes.

Stephen, it must be acknowledged, might well turn from the flowers to the face that was so near, and so bewitching in its present mood of abandonment to every impulse or passing thought. The mirthful, mischievous eyes, blue as

the loveliest depths of a cerulean sky, and sparkling with new lustre at every hit she gave or received (whether real or fancied was much the same to Frances); the cheeks radiant with colour that belonged even more to health than to beauty; the lips that seemed to play the part of a mocking antagonist even when they did not speak—all these, accompanied by that lovely, indefinable thing called expression, and revealing character, in her case a most attractive one superficially, if exceedingly faulty in deeper things, all these could not make Stephen forget her relations with the earl, his brother, on the one hand; or withdraw his glance without an effort, when she so challenged him, on the other.

And as to her thought of him? 'I have not yet begun to think,' was a favourite weapon with Frances Vandeleur; who thus warded off many a remonstrance at something she had said or done, which

she was conscious would not improve with discussion. And the same weapon sufficed now to keep her from doubts, hesitations, and discomforts, as she gave free scope to her love of amusement and coquetry with Stephen; and to her admiration of his person and character, as far as she yet knew, or was capable of understanding the last.

Stephen had indeed a manly and winning form and face. He was not yet of age; tall, slender but strong, graceful alike in movement and rest. He had very light, long brown hair, a rich brown eye that at ordinary times seemed to revel now in joyous mirth, now in sarcastic observation, but at others was full of a strange, restless activity—a searching light as of inquiry, that might range through earth and heaven, and still come back dissatisfied.

To Miss Vandeleur's eyes he was simply delightful. So bright was he, so apparently careless, prepared to take

the rough and smooth of the world with an unchanging smile, as if it did not really matter which! A trifler, who yet managed somehow to make trifling respectable, and who had been known to say trifles were the only things in which he never trifled; a companion who was charming when he liked his company, and chose to be so. Such were Miss Vandeleur's general impressions about her relative, and such was the average view of the persons among whom they moved.

She did not know or suspect what his wandering eye might in some chance moment surely have warned her of, independently of other manifestations (that would, however, only reach her in a modified form), namely, that there existed something deeper in Stephen apart from, possibly antagonistic to, all that she saw; even while that unnoticed something enhanced by its effects her pleasure in his society.

A sudden overcast of the face as if an

actual shadow had passed between it and far-off light; an abrupt dissonant tone amid the harmonies of the most genial and jovial communion; an unexpected and curt refusal in some matter in which he had been confidently relied on, and no apparent cause or explanation given to lessen the unpleasantness, were surely traits to stimulate the curiosity of a keen observer and student of human nature. But Frances Vandeleur was no such person; and she had no aid to accurate judgment from others; for society took of Stephen in these things, if it ever noticed them, very much the same pleasant but common-place estimate as herself.

Such then was the hero of our story. Such the heroine; about whom we must add a few words explanatory of those relations with the earl, which restrained Stephen in his intimacy with his fair companion.

Long years ago an unwritten compact had been made between the deceased

earl, and the father of Frances Vandeleur, that they would use their joint influence to secure her union with the earl's eldest son and heir, when she should be old enough to marry.

Her parents died within a few weeks of each other, and while she was still at school, but fast ripening into womanhood. The earl soon following, the widowed countess brought the orphaned girl, then in her sixteenth year, to her own home, where she has ever since been.

But the very first hour of Miss Vandeleur's residence in Harlaxton House, the countess with great delicacy referred to the engagement, in order to say,—

'Think of it, my dear, as a matter that must be agreeable to us all, if what has been so long talked of comes to pass; but one in which you must and shall be free as air to choose.'

Miss Vandeleur blushed and was confused, but the countess could see her words had been a relief. And from that moment

the young lady apparently considered that the best way to follow the countess's advice as to how she should think of the matter was—not to think of it at all!

She was young, beautiful, rich, with all the world before her, and she was henceforth free!

She had no objection to the earl. She did not at all know that she might not at some time marry him. Sufficient for the day was the good thereof. She could have asked but one thing more from fortune—absolute freedom—and now she had it! And for her thenceforth, life, world, future, appeared wholly bright and inexhaustible.

'Please mind your own business, and don't attend to mine!' Stephen is now saying to her.

'Why?'

'Because I have again got to number five, and expect to get to number six.'

'If you were a true knight you would, for that very reason, ask me to look on, to

inspire and guide you to victory, and reward you with a wreath of glory after.'

'Come down, then, and I'll try. But don't speak—don't stir—don't breathe—don't—'

'Live the while! I won't if I can help it. But don't keep me long dead—it isn't nice.'

Slowly, deliberately poising his cue, measuring and re-measuring the imaginary line to the red ball on the spot, and from it to the pocket, he struck, and before the ball had fairly reached its destination, he said, coolly,—

'I've done it!' and he had. The ball rolled into the pocket.

She clapped her hands rejoicingly, and said,—

'If I were to hang a wreath round your head you would grow too vain and presumptuous, so I shall put this flower into your buttonhole instead.' She took from her basket a white camellia only just opening, and placed it in his coat; Stephen

looking his thanks rather too effectively, for while saying nothing he made her blush.

'Well now, Stephen, I do want your help to finish this job,' she continued, 'by dotting at intervals a line of camellias on the foliage along the cornice, which I can't reach.'

'Send for the earl, my brother. He's taller than I, and will do anything to please you, even to growing amiable, if you don't keep him at it too long. Shall I seek him, or send for him?'

'You lazy creature! No! I don't believe you care a bit for the glorious night we are going to have!'

'Or for the fresh lovers that we expect to enrol in our train—eh?'

'What then do you care for?'

'You are not my confessor.'

'Oh! Then you have something to confess? Well, never mind. I'm told we shall know about everything some day, and of *that*, I suppose, among the rest.'

'Perhaps.'

'Well, I am going to tell you a secret.'

'Don't, if I am to keep it a secret; the responsibility is too great,' said Stephen.

'Well, you must know there is a fancy bazaar getting up to benefit some charity; I forget what, but a very good one.'

'Is that your secret?'

'If you don't be quiet, and hear me out, I shall run away.'

'Might that not be too dangerous a temptation?'

'Will you, sir, be quiet?'

'I'll try.'

'Well, and there are such preparations! Half-a-dozen countesses, who I verily believe never did a stitch of work in their lives, or saw a thimble, are said to be busy now with their needles. Mind, I don't vouch for the fact. And the stalls will be so beautiful, and the keepers of them so carefully selected—and oh, Stephen!—I am to be one, and have a stall all to myself.'

'And carry the principle and practice you have learned in the pillage of flowers into the larger field of humanity? Rob right and left, before and after, without scruple as without remorse?'

Reiterated bursts of merriment were Frances' only comment; and which Stephen could hardly help sharing, in spite of his grave face.

'Well, now, Stephen, isn't that a secret worth listening to?'

'Have you settled the department in which you propose to make tradesmen blush by your example for their want of skill in the levying of black-mail?'

'Yes; I am to turn artificial florist; and I can show you some of the most darling things, quite beating Nature's own productions.'

'For goodness' sake do nothing of the kind, or it is I who will have to run.'

'Ah, but I want your advice. We are to have a meeting to organise—is that the word?—our way to victory; and I am

helplessly in the dark, and shall have to sit still and say nothing.'

'Be easy! There is no power on earth can make or induce you to do that.'

'Wicked wretch!'

'I can give you one hint—not exactly novel, but telling, nevertheless. Before you go, hunt up all the pretty aristocrats of your acquaintance, enlist them at once, write down their names, present that paper to the committee, and say, "Good ladies, take that, and you need trouble no further. I answer for the results."'

'Of course! And among those results a considerable enlargement of Mr Stephen Froude's acquaintance with these divine creatures—eh?'

It was now Stephen's turn to break out with hearty and prolonged laughter, which Miss Vandeleur joined in, but not with her usual fervour. Seeing that, he was cruel enough to add,—

'I do see one difficulty.'

'Oh, you do!'

'Yes. What chance can a poor little planet like Venus have when surrounded with all these suns? She won't be seen. I myself sha'n't know where to find her!'

'Probably I may know where to find *you* in the centre of those suns, receiving, and giving light! Ha! ha! ha!' And Frances was herself again, prepared for a new move. 'But now, Stephen, let us be serious. You know I am not seventeen yet, and if not so good and clever as I ought to be, there is no reason why I should not improve. Don't you think so?'

Stephen evidently pricked up his ears at this, and the inquiring look of his eye before spoken of became fixed on her face, as she proceeded,—

'But people can't improve till they know what is wrong. Suppose, then, you tell me, say as a brother, just what you think of me.'

'But what if I don't think of you?'

'Pooh! that's nonsense. Now, will you do it?'

'No, indeed.'

'Why not?'

'Moths who are wise fear the candle.'

'Are you wise?'

'In that, yes. Perhaps in that only.'

'Well, at all events you must be wiser than me—I so young.'

'And I so old!' A simultaneous burst of laughter ensued, which had the effect of thawing Stephen so far that he asked her,—

'Is it compliment you seek?'

'No, the truth.'

'A medicine which I must take care to make pleasant.'

'On the contrary, I challenge and defy you to do your worst.'

'Which may be my best.'

'Begin. I am impatient to see myself in your glass.'

'Take one look, then, first, in another glass to comfort and strengthen yourself beforehand.'

Frances Vandeleur did look in the mirror; but for once was too much inter-

ested in the other face she saw there to gratify herself with her own.

'Shall I tell you the names that have at different times occurred to me?' he began.

'Names! For me?'

'Yes.'

'They won't be very dreadful?'

'Titles of honour, of course.'

'Ah, that's nice!'

'What think you of Rattlebrain?'

'Odious! Shocking!'

'The next you may like better — Humming Bird — for your quietly busy moods.'

'Yes, but remember, for I am getting frightened, what a slight pellet will knock a poor little humming bird down; even the blow of a breath through a tube; lips may be just as dangerous!'

'You should have thought of that before you provoked me!'

'Provoked! I like that.'

'Will-o'-the-Wisp!'

'Oh, mercy! What! taking people over graves, and through miasmas!'

'No, but tempting them into paths quite as dangerous, if more pleasant.'

Miss Vandeleur's eyelids dropped, and there was something like a flight of colour from her cheek, but she rallied instantly.

'Go on. This is delightful, and *so true!*'

The last two words she emphasised with such arch incisive sarcasm, as to convey, but more strongly, the exact meaning of, 'and so false.'

Stephen perceived she was getting angry; and then content, perhaps, with having opened so many fingers to let out harsh truths they had hitherto held fast, he opened one more that might a little modify the rest.

'Finally, thinking of the varying beauty, the airy grace, and the fanciful atmosphere in which the object of our remark delights to dwell—'

'Oh, I am an object, am I?'

'I sum up all into one word and thing —Butterfly!'

'These, then, are your titles of honour! Rattlebrain, Humming bird, Will-o'-the-Wisp, Butterfly! What shall I call you?'

'What you please.'

'Lord Harlaxton says *you* are the Butterfly; but see how magnanimous I am. I give you your own chosen name, Moth.'

'Very good. I do go blundering and knocking my head against obstacles, moth-like, that I haven't the sense to see, or see through, or avoid, when temptations are about.'

'Ah! and I know'—said Miss Vandeleur in a curiously significant voice, moving as she spoke farther away, and then only after a pause concluding her sentence—'what I know.'

'What do you know?'

'That moths fly by night!'

It was a shot that told. Stephen instantly advanced towards her; but she ran

behind the step-ladder, and holding the rails, looked at him between them.

'Your lips have betrayed you, and must pay the penalty!' And he came still closer.

'Hush! The countess!' exclaimed Miss Vandeleur.

Stephen turned to look for his mother —in vain; and when he again turned, his fair antagonist had mounted the ladder.

'Trickster! But no tricks shall save you,' said Stephen, as he put his foot on the first step of the ladder.

'Be still. I am busy,' she said demurely.

'So am I, in making comparisons. Looking back I see how easy it is to descend, how hard to rise. Looking forward—at you—I think how easy it was to rise, but how hard it will be to get down again without my consent.'

Miss Vandeleur took a long spray of foliage from her basket, and displaying it at length, said,—

'Do you see this, sir?'

'What is it?'

'A rose spray.'

'I see no roses.' And he began to ascend the ladder.

'No, but you shall feel the thorns!' she responded.

He caught at the spray, and was so hurt that he got down to relieve himself from a spike that had deeply entered the flesh.

While he was thus engaged, she also rapidly descended, and going to him, said,—

'War itself recognises the beneficence of those who come under the banner of the Red Cross.'

'As displayed in your cheeks?' asked Stephen, forgetting his pain in the vivid beauty of the face before him.

'Under that defence I come to help you. Let me look!'

He held out his hand, and she deftly drew the thorn forth, while he gazed at her, forgetting everything else in the world

—excepting his claim, which he began to press.

'Thanks! The issue is now changed. You owed me a debt. Now I owe you one. Cannot both be settled at the same time?'

'I think not,' replied Miss Vandeleur, while she circled the rose spray round her head, and brought the ends to the side of her face; which grew more and more bewitching, as it became more and more powerful in its own defence.

Then remembering, perhaps, that discretion is the better part of valour, she tripped away, humming a popular operatic air, looking back at him all the while.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CABINET.

RICHARDS had not long left the countess to fulfil his double duty, that relating to the invitations, and that of keeping the young people in ignorance, before he was again summoned to her presence.

'I want the key of the closed room,' she said abruptly. 'I have occasion to go there.'

Richards literally held up his hands in horror at the thought.

'That room, your ladyship! Why, it has never been opened since my lord, the earl, died.'

'Surely no one should know that so well as I, who gave the order to close it!'

'But, my lady, it must be full of dust and cobwebs, and spiders, and other nasty things. A dreadful place to go into! But to-morrow we can have it put to rights.'

'To-morrow!' echoed the countess. And then in her heart she added, 'Will there be for me any such to-morrow?'

Moved probably by the picture of desolation he suggested, which had not occurred to her own preoccupied mind, and which shocked her for quite different reasons than the physical unpleasantness, she said, after a brief pause,—

'I want some papers from the cabinet. Can I depend upon you to have it brought here the moment the men return, untouched, except for the removal of the dust, if it be as you say?'

'It shall be here in a few minutes. I will myself open the door, do what needs to be done to the cabinet, nor let it out of

my sight, till under your ladyship's own eyes.'

'Thanks, my good Richards, that is just what I wish. Be as quick, then, as you can.'

He went out, but came back to say that both the footmen-in-waiting had returned, so that they would bring the cabinet at once.

Though the countess had changed her purpose to go to the room in question herself, she could not but follow in agitating thought those who were about to intrude on the lonely solitude of the chamber of death; for it was not only there that her husband had died, but it was there that she had made known to him the perilous secret of her life; and after a brief but terrible period, in which she had expected he would curse her with his dying breath, he had melted in compassion, forgiven her, but held her bound by the most solemn compact, to act as he laid down for her in writing, not merely

'before her death,' but before any imminent danger of death known to, or suspected by her.

That paper, and others connected with it, are in the cabinet, about which she is so anxious, that she cannot but open her door to listen.

She hears the bustle of the removal, and she hears the cabinet strike once, twice, against the wall, being heavy and unmanageable; and each blow seems to reverberate through her soul in her fear of any unforeseen accident tending to exposure.

The burden approaches—is brought into the countess's room by the two footmen, Richards carefully guarding it to the best of his ability, by hand and voice, in his directions to the others; but all the same, as the men bear it to a part of the room silently indicated by the finger of their mistress, it gets tilted and shaken as it reaches the floor, and a drawer that happens to be unlocked starts forth, and falls to the ground.

With a cry of anger the countess rushed to the place where the drawer lay, stooped to touch and glance at the contents, then turned from it, ashamed at the excitement and display, as she recognised their unimportant character.

'There is no harm done, I see, James,' said the countess to the man, who stood gazing at her in helpless fear of the consequences of his slip. 'That will do. Please, Richards, mind what I said about my son.'

And then she was left alone with the cabinet; which soon filled for her the place where she was with shadows of the departed, that for the time became more real to her than could be any of those guests she had invited and forbidden.

CHAPTER X.

THE DAWNING PLAN.

PRESENTLY the countess opened the cabinet, took from it a number of written documents, and began to destroy them after a glance at their contents, by tearing them into pieces, and throwing them on the fire.

The process distressed and wearied her; and led to the question—Could she afford time for such labour now?

She stopped, returned the unexamined papers to the cabinet, unlocked a secret drawer, and took from it a small red morocco jewel case, which she placed on the table; while she sank into her chair to

let the physical agitation caused by the act pass away.

Then she opened it, drew forth a letter, and read the inscription on the back :—

'To the

Hon. Stephen C. Froude,'

murmuring the while,—

'O Stephen! Stephen! what wilt thou say when thou shalt know by this message from thy dead father, thou art his true heir, the rightful Lord of Harlaxton?'

She did not attempt to read the letter, which had been left unsealed. Its contents were only too well known to her. But she held it in her hands a long time.

Did the temptation occur to her to destroy the letter, as she had destroyed those other useless and uncompromising papers?

Did she ask herself whether indeed this packet might not prove worse than useless, a fruitful source of evil, whilst compromis-

ing what she valued so highly, and held so sacred, her own honour, and the honour of her family.

Did the thoughts occur in all their sinister significance,—

'I alone now live to be responsible for what was done. And I alone know?'

The reverie was abruptly broken. She took a larger envelope to enclose the letter, sealed it with her own seal, and wrote a few words outside.

Then hearing some one at the door, she hastily returned the letter to the jewel case, before the entrance of a servant announcing Mr Lynx, the family solicitor.

Short, thin, and wiry, bending as if he were engaged in a perpetual bow, which yet had no humility in it; but seemed only a convenient screen to veil the sharp, penetrating, distrustful glance, which his cold, steely eye shot forth from time to time upon all with whom he was brought into contact who might become hostile; no

greater contrast could well be imagined than Mr Lynx, and the countess's other professional adviser, Dr Baxter.

The countess was his client: in herself and her family the most important of all his clients. She was a mourner, and full of that beauty which is so impressive because it is so rare, the beauty of age when it is beautiful. These things Mr Lynx was fully conscious of, and deferential accordingly.

But, nevertheless, there was an air about him which perplexed the countess. She did not like to stigmatise it in her thoughts as suspicion—a putting himself on his guard—yet it looked so like that as to create a sense of annoyance; which revealed itself in the distant and haughty coldness of her tone and manner, as she began in the curtest words to give him directions.

Curiously enough these unpleasantnesses, so far from affecting him unpleasantly, seemed, on the contrary, to restore him at

once to what might be supposed his normal equanimity, as she began,—

'I want a will prepared that shall bequeath everything I possess in my own right to my son Stephen. How long will it take you?'

'It has to be carefully drawn, revised by a conveyancer, fresh copies prepared; still, if time presses, it can be managed in three days.'

'It must be done in three hours!'

'Quite impossible, your ladyship, if I am to stake my professional reputation on its sufficiency when done.'

'Then I must take another course. There are pens, ink and paper. Please to write as I dictate.'

Mr Lynx took his seat at the table and prepared to obey. The countess began,—

'I, Mary, Countess of Harlaxton, widow of the deceased Earl of Harlaxton, give and bequeath my freehold house and estate of Southwell, in Gloucestershire, and

all my personal property of every kind whatsoever, to my son Stephen—'

'My second son,' corrected the lawyer, looking up from under his grey, bushy eyebrows at the countess; who saw the glance, and was strangely affected by it.

'You confuse me. Please to write just as I give it to you!'

He bowed in acquiesence, but that look had opened a new and more fearful vista to the countess. Could the dying earl have confided the secret of the paper in the cabinet to his legal adviser, and concealed the fact from her? Her cheeks flamed at the thought, but she lost not a moment in questioning him.

'Do you recognise this?' she said, placing her hand on the jewel case before her.

'Yes.'

'And this?'

She drew forth the letter, forgetting for the moment its new covering. He looked

at it sharply from a little distance before answering,—

'No, unless it is under a fresh cover.'

She broke the seal, and removed the envelope.

'Do you now recognise it?'

'Perfectly!'

'And the contents?'

'Were made known to me by the earl himself.'

The countess smiled, and was silent for a little time. But it was such a smile as only appears on the human face in moments of bitterest trial; a kind of ironical acquiescence in the dealings of fate, however awful they may be. She was thinking what would have been her position if she could have been tempted even for the most unselfish of reasons to destroy the letter, and felt overwhelmed with shame and humiliation.

'Anything more?' she asked.

'Yes, he authorised and required me by letter to do whatever might be requisite,

to see the things promised by your ladyship carried into effect; without, however, as I am bound and glad to say, expressing the slightest doubt of your fulfilling them, apart from any extraneous influence.'

'That was very good of him! Very! Well, Mr Lynx, there is one thing I can thank you for. You have been frank and straightforward with me; and the Countess of Harlaxton can ever be grateful for that. But since you know so much, let me make an addition to your knowledge. Read what I had written on the new cover, the moment before you came in.'

The lawyer took the cover, and read,—

'For my beloved son Stephen. Not to be opened, without my express permission, till after my death.'

'And this you intend to give to him?'

'The chamber where my husband died has been re-entered for the first time today, in order to bring the cabinet here

that I might be ready with this. I shall presently return it to the case, and to the secret drawer of the cabinet. And please to understand, once for all, there it will remain while I live, if not previously given to my son, or taken out to give him. And there you will find it when I am no more. I have two keys. Take one of them.'

All the lawyer's secret doubts and fears, with which he had come prejudiced, seeing how powerful were the temptations to eternal silence, now melted away like frost in the warm sun. His manner changed. He became profoundly respectful, and unwontedly sympathetic.

Addressing himself first to the will the countess had dictated, he finished it from where he had left off; gave it to her to sign; called in Richards and the countess's maid to be witnesses; Lady Harlaxton acknowledged the signature, and dismissed them. Then the lawyer said to her, jestingly,—

'The only objection I have to make to your ladyship's will is that it is so good you will be wanting no other.'

'Let this, then, be my will, while you prepare a more formal one. And this same jewel case shall be its place of deposit, with my husband's letter, and the other documents.'

'And now, Lady Harlaxton, may I be permitted to say that I shall be proud to render you any service in my power.'

She looked at him long and wistfully. She did want some one to share her counsel; and nowhere could she look for a better man, now that his true mind and feeling were visible, and known to be friendly to herself. She made the venture,—

'Dr Baxter warns me I am in danger. I may live many years, but meantime he finds it necessary, at my desire, to resort to strong measures even to secure me a single day.'

'I trust you will incur no fresh risk.'

'You are too late; I have acted. Let us hope all will be well, and use the time as if we anticipated the reverse. Listen.'

In low tones, but full of the deepest significance, she said,—

'What if Stephen were to marry Miss Vandeleur, my relative, the heiress; and with the wealth she brings him, and what I can bequeath, becomes rich enough to found a new family, perhaps even obtain a new title?'

'Yes?'

'Surely you must know what else I would say?'

'That your son might then be content to leave his rights in abeyance?'

'To sink them altogether for my sake, and for the yet unblemished honour of a noble family!'

'But he knowing his rights, and in possession of everything necessary for his claim?'

'Most certainly.'

'That might be a desirable conclusion,

but one that no man so situated ever consented to, or ever will consent to.'

'But if he does consent?'

'Then there's an end of the matter, so far as he is concerned.'

'And I will look no farther.'

His words had given great relief to the countess. She had feared that her husband in showing he would not trust her alone with the secret, or the fulfilment of her pledge to him, might have gone farther still, and left her no choice as to the ultimate solution, in which all her hopes were now confined.

That difficulty was clearly out of her path. And the discovery became a new incentive to carry out her plan; one long since dimly shaped out; and so spare herself and family those revelations to the world, that grew more and more awful to her in contemplation.

'Shall I surprise you, Mr Lynx, if I ask you to prepare yet another document, also dealing with the disposal of all I am worth,

apart from a life annuity of five hundred a year?'

'Nothing surprises a lawyer, even the not taking his advice, provided you don't tell him so.'

'I should like a deed of settlement prepared to give my property to Stephen on his marriage with Miss Vandeleur. At present he has only a yearly allowance.'

'Ah yes, I understand! A rough draft shall be ready for you within two or three hours.'

'Can you entrust it to a safe man? One who will be silent, without even knowing it is necessary to be silent, seeing I may fail, and the marriage never take place?'

'Let me consider. I think I do know one safe and silent person who may be entrusted with the job. But your ladyship knows him too, and may be dubious?'

'Who can you mean?'

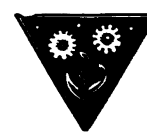
'Myself.'

The lawyer had been trying to win a smile. He succeeded now. And said no more. The countess held out her hand, which he grasped so cordially as to pain her. But the pain itself was received as pleasure, betokening the strength of his feeling, and so they parted.

The countess was now left, as she hoped and believed, in possession of ample means to secure the success of the scheme she had devised, and which the more she dwelt on it, became only the more attractive.

Suddenly there was a rush of blood to her head at the sound of a loud, angry voice in the corridor; which in an instant changed the character of her thoughts, and caused her to put hurriedly her husband's packet, and the newly-made will, into the jewel case. But the case itself she had not time to place in the secret receptacle, so she thrust it into the drawer

which had fallen out during the removal, and was invitingly half-open. She had scarcely done this and returned to her chair before the door opened, and Lord Harlaxton entered.



CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST STEP.

SEEING how ill the countess looked, and noticing besides her great and peculiar agitation, Lord Harlaxton restrained the resentment seething within him, that his mother should have countermanded all the invitations of the night without even consulting him; and forgetting, as he chose to think she did, that he and the young heiress could very well have fulfilled the duties of hospitality, even if she (the countess) had been unable herself to share them, or even to be present.

It was clearly no time for the display of

temper on that ground. And besides, he had newer matters of complaint to be spoken of presently, when she had recovered herself.

Taking her hand, as they met, he kissed her, hoped she was better, and led her to her chair.

She felt the coldness of his demeanour, and answered in corresponding feeling.

He had now taken a seat at the table, and was evidently unwilling to begin what he wanted to say, in the countess's state; so uttered a few words upon whatever subject came uppermost, which she replied to with more interest than she had before shown.

Her eyes being then directed towards him, she saw him mechanically take up some paper from the table, and look at it, as men will in seeking trivial occupation that may disguise their thoughts from those present, and who are or may be watching. For an instant she did not see or think what paper it was till the change

in the earl's face told her the truth. She had, in her hurry to conceal from him the all-important packet, and its place of deposit, forgotten the additional cover and writing she had placed on it.

Presently he looked up, and said to her, his handsome but common-place countenance flushing with renewed anger and excitement the while,—

'May I ask the meaning of this which I find on your table?'

He then read aloud the inscription, which indicated, the reader will remember, that the packet was for the countess's 'beloved son,' but not to be opened, without her express permission, until she was dead.

'Since it refers to Stephen and not to you, I do not think you should ask.'

'And the contents—which I see have flown—do they also refer to Stephen alone, and not to me?'

'Do you presume to question me?'

'Mother, I will tell you the truth. The favour you show to my brother, and which

he so ill repays, is becoming a subject of scandalous gossip.'

Pale as death, but perfectly collected, the countess boldly confronted him, to ask in low tones and slowly delivered words,—

'And what do they dare to say?'

'Oh, nothing that one can take hold of. And I should not myself attach the slightest importance to their remarks, but that I do not—cannot any longer conceal from myself, you do not care for me as you do for my brother. You keep things from me that, as your eldest son and his brother, I have a right to know. I went out this morning to my club, expecting to meet at night all those whom we have so long neglected, and I there learn you have reversed all the arrangements—nobody is to come! I return home hurriedly, and I meet Mr Lynx, who has had business with you and a long interview, but who cannot find time to exchange half-a-dozen words with me, his principal employer. A man

meets me in the hall, and asks me to pay him six hundred and odd pounds that Stephen has owed him for I know not how long, and threatens to arrest him before my very face if I refuse, which I certainly did. And that reminds me that I had been previously waylaid by another man—disreputable to the last degree, but a friend of Stephen's, so he told me—and asking me to guide him to his friend! They did meet finally, and both insulted me. I come to you, and scarcely have we exchanged half-a-dozen words before some mysterious secret between you and my brother crops up, and then you wonder and take offence if I say, as I do now —In Heaven's name what does it all mean?'

The countess was visibly moved.

'Philip,' she said, calling him by his Christian name, which she did so seldom that its recurrence always marked a mood of favour towards him, 'there is much of truth in your complaint. I can say no

more now, but I will not forget it. I have been—I am ill—very ill.'

'But can I be of no service in such a time? The lawyer—cannot I—'

'The lawyer,' she said, interrupting him, 'is drawing up my will, which, as you will expect, and I hope approve, is entirely in favour of Stephen. Poor boy! He has nothing, and as yet is nothing.'

'And will be nothing, unless he very much mends his ways.'

'Help him in that if you can! If you cannot, then bear with him for a time for my sake. I own he seems frivolous—careless of everything beyond the present hour; given, I fear, to indulgences of which he ought to be ashamed, of which he will be ashamed, but which in my soul, I believe, spring mainly from his having no settled duties, nothing to create ambition, if he has not already felt its spur; or to develop it in the pursuit of worthy and noble ends, if it already lives and stirs at times in his breast! Oh! trust me, Philip,

he will emerge, and make us all proud of him yet; those, at least, who may live to see.'

The earl was now somewhat moved in his turn at the sorrowful meaning of these last words, and asked with kindly interest,—

'Cannot something be done?'

'My dear Philip, that is just what I am coming to. We must get him married, and well married. Make him turn politician, or country gentleman and magistrate, cultivating his own gardens, and farm. Depend upon it, a wife will guide him the way he should go, if she is a true wife, and really cares for him.'

'And where is that exemplary young lady to be found?'

'Where, but at our own hearth?'

The earl started to his feet in surprise and anger.

'What! Miss Vandeleur, to whom you and he both know I am paying my addresses? This is too much!'

'Philip, answer me. Has Miss Vandeleur yet said one single word that can justify you in treating her as your own peculiar property; or make it wrong in me, or in Stephen, to wish him to try his chance?'

'I have no doubt of my success with her, if she be let alone!'

'Can the Earl of Harlaxton be content with a success gained through such ignoble conditions? Pardon me—the word escaped. But I shall appeal to you on other grounds. Think what you have of the world's goods; what a position you enjoy! And then think of Stephen's destitute condition, and join me in the work of building up his fortunes.'

'In any other way I will—cordially; but not in this! I love Miss Vandeleur—I have proposed to her. In a word, I will submit to no interference there.'

'You really have proposed to her?'

'In effect, yes.'

'And her answer—'

'Was, what such answers often are, a check for the present, but no more.'

The countess rose from her seat, went to him, and took his hand, while she said in tones of the deepest pathos,—

'I cannot tell you, not now, all that is in my heart; but I entreat you—it is in all probability a dying mother who speaks — I entreat you to let me have my own way in this. I conjure you to abandon all farther pursuit of this young lady till—till at least she can arrive at a knowledge of her own mind between you. You have had your chance, let Stephen now have his.'

'You forget it was my father's wish that I should marry Miss Vandeleur!'

'It was mine, too, in years long gone by.'

'You know how anxious he was that the Castle of Harlaxton, the cradle of our race, should be rebuilt, and so redeemed from its present disgraceful state. That is hopeless with my present income.

I can and shall do it, with Miss Vandeleur's fortune.'

'The castle can wait.'

'Pardon me, I think not.'

'It must!'

'Must?'

'It must! It shall! Tempt me no more!'

'I stand upon my rights.'

'But be sure, Lord Harlaxton, that you do *stand* upon them. I now say my last word—beware!'

She then turned her back on him, and left him to consider at his leisure the warning she had given, by abruptly quitting the room.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EARL'S TEMPTATION.

THUS left alone by the countess, her 'Beware!' ringing in his ears, but conveying no definite meaning to his mind, the earl stood for a few seconds staring in helpless astonishment first at her retreating form, and then at the closed door as it shut her from his sight.

'Beware!' Yes, that was her word. But what was he to be beware of? What could there be to justify such a threat, even if used only in a moment of anger, and with purposes far less important than her excitement suggested?

But what if the impression she had given him was the true one? Nay, that the event meant more than she said? He could not but remember that she had tried to be conciliatory, and it was only when she found he was not to be juggled out of his rights in connection with Miss Vandeleur that her temper gave way, and she launched a threat at him, to be regretted perhaps a moment after as exposing her secret thoughts.

And then, as if to avoid still more deeply compromising herself, she rushes from the room, leaving him behind in a place to which even her family resorted only with a certain delicacy of reserve when she was present, and never knowingly during her absence!

What then could she mean, if she really meant anything at all, of real moment to him? Had he not better wait for her return, and demand an instant and full explanation?

He decided to do so, and sat down.

The envelope was still there on the table, with the loving, mysterious, and tragic superscription to Stephen, right before his eyes. He examined it, to see if there was anything written inside, but saw only a blank, reminding him unpleasantly of the vacuity of his own mind, in regard to a solution of the many questions raised by it.

What could have been in it? The shape implied simply a large packet. Where was that now? Why had it been taken out? Perhaps to show the lawyer.

He looked round, and the cabinet met his eye. He had been too much occupied to notice it particularly while the countess was in the room: now he gazed at it with wonder and misgiving.

What! The countess, while so ill as to be obliged to countermand the invitations for the night, and to send for her lawyer, could still make it her first care not to communicate with her family, but

to cause the removal of this heavy lumbering piece of furniture from a place no one had entered since the dead body of his father was taken from it!

This, then, had been the place of deposit for the mysterious packet. And in all probability it was still here.

Surely it must have been his own coming that caused her hurriedly to put away the contents in the cabinet, and to forget or have no time to use the covering envelope?

But, then, would she not now be coming back in hot haste, as she recollected she had left him alone, where she had also left important secrets that he might there discover? Whereas she was, in fact, delaying her return, as having no care that he should have first gone away.

Here Lord Harlaxton stayed his thoughts in mid-career, finding how uncomfortable they were getting. He rose, walked to the cabinet, took a long survey of it, crossing his arms upon his breast

that he might keep them dignified and *safe* the while. The only result was that he noticed a drawer projecting a half-inch or so, as if recently opened, and left unlocked possibly in the hurry and alarm of his coming.

Disturbed in mind the earl thought it best to return to his chair, again to wait for the countess, and again to strive for enlightenment; but felt more hopelessly at sea than ever when he reflected that if the mysterious paper was really in that unlocked drawer, it could be of no serious importance to him; or the countess would certainly have been here, returned to guard it.

How long had she been away? He could not safely guess. It might have been ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, and yet he did not feel sure that five minutes had elapsed.

Suddenly new light seemed to break. Her taking such swift offence—her wild threat—and the haughty resentment of

her departure, might only have been assumed to cover her desire to remove at once, unsuspected, the letter or paper to a safer place of concealment; since he had seen the envelope which suggested so much, and which she might no longer care to use?

He went to the door, carefully guarding himself from anything that might look furtive even to himself, turned the handle, and pushed it open half way, and listened.

For perhaps a minute Lord Harlaxton heard nothing but a low, indistinguishable murmur of voices from a group at the bottom of the staircase; and he was going back into the room, when he was spell-bound by a bright ringing peal of laughter from Miss Vandeleur; then by the silence that ensued, till broken by the sweet and penetrating tones of the countess, quickly followed by a boisterous ha! ha! from Stephen.

The listener's first thought brought

the red blood to his cheek—they were laughing at him!

The next thought was that they could not do anything of the kind; and then his common sense explained the whole simply, and for the most part truly. The countess must have met them both when she left him; had felt it necessary to allay their alarm about her state; and then Stephen, 'trifling and frivolous as ever,' would relapse into his usual self and make them laugh; while the countess would seem to enter into his mirth, to escape deeper observation. If so she would certainly leave them at the earliest convenient moment, either to come here, or go where else she had meditated going instead. If the last, what should he do? Or could he then do anything?

Leaving the door ajar, he again returned to his chair, thinking of Stephen's loud laugh; and wondering why this trouble of to-day, whenever he tried to pursue it to its birthplace, always brought him in

the end to his brother, as if all possible evil likely to affect him must centre there. Why?

He was constrained to acknowledge that it might be because he disliked, almost hated him.

A sycophantic friend of the earl once remarked to Stephen quite seriously,—

'What a very dignified and imposing-looking person your brother the earl is!'

'Very much so, indeed,' was Stephen's reply. 'And for that reason he fashions his countenance to the similitude of an antique tragic mask, so that no one may see or suspect how little there is to hide.' The remark, and the comment on it, soon reached the earl, but were not soon to be forgotten.

Lord Harlaxton was one of those men in whom pride of birth and ancestry so completely absorb their whole being, that nothing can materially add to their sense of greatness; and who, parodying the saying of the philosopher that a Divinity

must have been invented if we had not instinctively got to the idea, fully believe that an aristocracy must have been specially created if it had not naturally grown. Something of this kind once escaped the earl in a moment of confidential effusion when Stephen was near, who observed,—

'Yes, and you would have been quite ready to undertake the creation, and to begin with yourself. All right! I should like to have been a spectator!'

The words coolly dropped from him as in lazy indifference; but fell like icicles on the earl's hot brain, which was not then in the most favourable state for their reception.

For these and similar jibes the earl had turned against Stephen; even while as a Christian nobleman, and the patron of the Church of England through a dozen or more livings, he felt sorry it should be so; and resented deeply the being placed in so false a position.

But to do him justice, it must be said

there was a deeper and far more powerful cause for his dislike of Stephen; one that envenomed all lesser causes, and yet was in itself natural and worthy of respect. This was the marked difference in the countess's feelings towards the two, which he had felt and suffered from almost from the hour of Stephen's birth. She loved the one better even than she chose to acknowledge. She did not love the other half so well as she tried to make him and the world believe.

That was the thorn in the flesh, and it rankled exceedingly; for the earl loved her as strongly as his nature would permit; but receiving nothing from her to nourish love (so he chose to think), he nourished discontent as regarded her, and dislike as regarded Stephen, instead; and these are weeds that grow apace.

And now she bids him 'Beware!' Why? Because he objects to be deprived for Stephen's sake of the lady who has been so long assigned to him by common

consent, and by a kind of unexpressed engagement of many years' standing!

With such a threat he can only connect the contents of the envelope, the lawyer's visit, and the removal hither of the cabinet; which he remembers was always used by his father for the reception and safe custody of his private papers. Was it to obtain, and to keep always under her own eye, the contents of the envelope, without herself venturing into the chamber of death, that she had caused the cabinet to be brought here? Was it possible that his father had written something on his deathbed which had remained till to-day in the cabinet? And why 'to-day?' Ah, that was only too plain—the countess's sudden alarm about her health.

Greatly troubled, he sought relief in anger, which suggested a short cut to the solution of his difficulties. 'Beware!' indeed. What if he took the warning in his own way, and *did* beware how he let the present opportunity escape of gauging

the value of the menace, for which he had given no provocation?

A minute or two more would surely bring her; and he might then lose his only chance of discovering what she sought so mysteriously to veil, and yet to turn mischievously against him.

He walked to the wall, as if to repress the temptation, and tried to study the pictures. But he passed along, vainly seeing one that could interest him and occupy his thoughts, and soon came to the cabinet.

After a glance round to see whether the countess might yet be coming—his air and attitude so studied that it is no wonder he half-deceived himself into the belief he was doing nothing to be ashamed of—he put his hand to the slightly open drawer, as if he would examine the marquetry-work with which the whole cabinet was ornamented, drew it partially forth, and then nervously thrust it in again, obviously obeying some instinct of

honour, that warned him at the last moment of the meanness of the act. He turned, and was going back to his seat, when he heard a soft step outside; and had barely time to compose his attitude, and advance a step or two towards the door, before the countess entered, meeting him.

What he felt may be imagined, as he saw how nearly he had been caught in the very act of opening the drawer.

A glance at each other's face told much of the truth which both were striving to conceal.

The countess saw in his countenance the confusion of shame; and felt sure he had taken advantage of her absence, or tried to do so, for the discovery of that which it was most vital to her to conceal.

The earl saw in her agitation, repressed but visible, clear proof that she had come back full of alarm to find him still in her room, and that her secret, whatever it might be, therefore was here!

The position was so painful and dangerous, and yet on the surface so shadowy and uncertain, that both were moved simultaneously to escape from it, for however short a time.

'Philip,' said the countess, 'I should have come back to you before to say how sorry I was for my harsh words, and to beg you to forgive and forget them, but that I met Stephen and Miss Vandeleur, and stopped to speak to them.'

'And I,' responded the earl, 'should not have waited, but in the hope of your doing just what you have done! I am glad now that I did. Very glad.' And therewith he again kissed her.

'Miss Vandeleur was asking for you. Let us go to her,' said the countess, with a smile.

And with demonstrative courtesy and good feeling on both sides, they left the room together. Venial impostors, both! Neither deceiving nor deceived. Sincerely glad of the momentary pause and rest

which the circumstances suggested, nay imposed, upon them, though conscious it was such rest as a traveller whose strength suddenly failed him, might be obliged to take at the base of an avalanche.

CHAPTER XIII.

HE IS INNOCENT.

BARELY two minutes passed before the countess returned to her room alone, her face and gestures revealing the passionate fear and resentment that she had been obliged to disguise in Lord Harlaxton's presence; but which now burst forth with unnatural vehemence on account of the restraint, and the feeling she had stooped low indeed to obtain a moment's breathing time to think.

She went straight to the unlocked drawer, drew forth the jewel case, and found within the all-important package

lying below the rough draft of her will.

Putting her hand on her heart to still its hurried beating, and raising her half-closed eyes heavenwards, she murmured with intensest feeling,—

'Thank God, for one thing at least! If he has seen this packet, he has not dared to take it away!'

She went to the door, locked it, and trembling at every step, got dizzily to her chair, the letter in her hand, where her senses left her for some minutes.

Recovering consciousness, she took from her pocket the doctor's medicine, and again drank, and in a short time revived, and felt able to meditate.

Had he seen and read the letter? She grieved that she had not again sealed it, after showing it to the lawyer. Had she done so she would now be relieved of her worst fears, or know they were too true. Anyway, she felt the question was one that must be solved at any cost.

After anxious deliberation she began to act. She replaced the letter in the secret drawer of the cabinet—one known only to herself (since her husband's death); feeling certain it would be safer there than anywhere else, even if a searcher, baffled at the unlocked drawer, should suspect the cabinet still to be the place of deposit. There were three locks to open, the outer one, which let down the writing slope, then the one that secured the drawer, and lastly the lock of the secret and smaller drawer behind. These would be trifles to a burglar, but the earl was in his way an honourable man; and would, she was sure, need excuses for every dubious step he took, and perhaps find them, up to a certain point; but certainly not to the breaking open one receptacle after another, or still worse, to the tampering with false keys.

She hesitated some time over the next step, reasoning thus:—

'He may not have even touched the

drawer, and I am greatly wronging him by the suspicion.

'Or he may have tried it, may have seen the jewel case and letter, and had no time for more through my appearance.

'Or, lastly, and this alone I need seriously to fear as beyond my power to remedy, he may not only have seen but read, and the whole truth is known to him, to be acknowledged or denied as he may see fit. If so, he knows our case beforehand, and may so hamper and worry us that nothing will be left but open battle; which means the overthrow of my most cherished hopes for myself, for Stephen, and even for him.

'Is it possible to guess what happened from what I saw on his face? Suppose he had tried, but had not time to satisfy himself? Or been tempted, but resisted the temptation, and then I came? Might not the thought of my discovering him in so humiliating a position fully explain the look I saw?

'Could he, if he had learned all, if he knew that he was on the very brink of a tremendous precipice, conceal the awful chaos of his mind in a simple, confused aspect of shame in order to deceive me?

'My own questions answer me. He is innocent. I do, I will so believe till I find evidence of his guilt.

'I have escaped a frightful danger. Let me be warned by it to guard myself better in the future!'

And in thinking of that she forgot for a brief time to realise the failure of the very first step of her plan.

Once more the countess drank of the doctor's medicine, saying to herself as she did so, it should be for the last time. And the effect in a few minutes was as potent as before.

She no longer dwelt on the recent failure; on the contrary, all her thoughts were again how to secure full success.

CHAPTER XIV.

DAYS OF LANGUOR.

A DAY of such excitements could not but tell heavily on the countess for many days after. But she felt them only in the languor of her frame, and the absolute necessity for inaction thus imposed.

Her mind was clear, her spirits bright and equable, her hopes strong, for she was beginning to believe she had years of life before her, to be well and wisely used, perhaps even enjoyed. So thinking and feeling, she was able to restrain her impatient thoughts; which every now and

then startled her by predicting this misfortune, and that irresistible calamity, as likely to flow from the delay in the execution of her project.

Lord Harlaxton was curiously affected by the state of things. In so far as it confirmed his belief that he had nothing to fear from his mother's strange menace, it was agreeable and welcome; and caused his own attitude towards her to be respectful, sympathetic, busily-kind. But when the menace and fear began alike to fade out of his thoughts, the old jealousy of his mother's love for Stephen took their place, and he was again captious, irritable, inconsiderate.

But not without cause. Before this change occurred, Stephen, for some inscrutable reason, was much absent from home, and negligent about many little matters in which the countess was accustomed to employ him. She could not help seeing the contrast in his behaviour to that of the earl; nor could the earl

help contrasting their several rewards. To him she was kind and full of grateful acknowledgments; and if he had not had opportunities forced upon him of seeing how she received Stephen, he might have been perfectly content. But when he saw her colour deepen, her eyes joyously sparkle, her whole attitude instinctively change at the mere sound of Stephen's voice and approaching rapid step; when he witnessed the delight on her features as they met—all the truant's seeming forgetfulness of her in an instant by her forgot; he could no longer avoid the disagreeable and humiliating conviction that she might respect him, but that her whole heart and soul were given to Stephen. And then he soon relapsed into his former self.

It was on an April morning that Lady Harlaxton, exhilarated by the exquisite beauty of the sky, rose earlier than her wont, and opened her bedroom window; and was suddenly greeted by a delicious

bird-chorus, as though they knew well who was the dispenser of the crumbs from the table that had kept them alive through hail and snow, sleet and driving rain; and had made for them artificial nests in the trees of her garden wherein to find shelter from the unendurable cold and storm, that had preceded those memorable March days that have been spoken of.

The spirit of the month, and the wealth of the spring, seemed to fill her heart to overflowing, as she felt how much better she was; how prepared to begin with new courage the grave duties she had to fulfil; and how all things seemed to smile on her, and bid her be of good cheer.

It was in that state Lord Harlaxton found her on this particular morning, pacing to and fro by the open window of her favourite room; and stopping occasionally to smell at or lovingly admire the pretty circular basket of spring

flowers, emerging from maiden-hair ferns, that Miss Vandeleur had herself just brought from Covent Garden; with other similar treasures in such quantity and luxuriance, that Stephen, who received her brougham at the gate, complained loud enough for her to hear, that he could not find her; and was thinking of going away to report so mysterious a circumstance, when she ended the little comedy by exploding in laughter.

Lord Harlaxtion seemed to feel instinctively that he had better make his plunge at once, lest he should not be able to do it at all, in the happy mood of the countess.

'Mother, those two have been here again!'

'Those two?' echoed the countess, whose dreamy, happy tone suggested she might have been vaguely thinking of two angels, or any other pair of equally pleasant and suggestive personages. But the shock promptly came.

'That creditor of Stephen's—to whom he owes six or seven hundred pounds!'

'Wouldn't it be best to pay him?'

'Certainly, if Stephen can find the money. And if when he has paid him he can perform the same operation in I know not how many other quarters; for otherwise this unseemly clamour will go on till they cut it short by his arrest.'

'Would you permit that?'

'Should not your ladyship ask me if I will consciously aid and abet my brother in maintaining an extravagant and profligate life?'

'Profligate—Lord Harlaxton!'

'The word slipped from me, but I abide by it. You must surely have noticed how frequently of late he has slept from home.'

'He has friends—creditable ones—why may he not stay with them? Surely you do not forget how estranged you have been for many months past; and how that fact may suggest a more generous and just appreciation of his habits.'

'More generous doubtless, not more just. I know much that it does not become you to hear.'

'What is there a mother is not bound to hear if it affects a son's vital welfare? I command you to speak!'

'I will do better. I will give you an opportunity for judging personally the character of his friends. There is one now below, whose visits are a common jest among the servants.'

'A gentleman?'

'Anything in the world but that!'

'Your lordship's notions of gentlemen are somewhat—well, not perhaps peculiar, suppose we say exalted; and this may be a very decent man after all, if not fit to take rank among *your* gentlemen.'

'Shall I bring him to you?'

'Perhaps—if you will first have the goodness to tell me in simple language anything by which I may judge. What is he like?'

'Well, I know not how better to de-

scribe his appearance, manners, and language, than as a combination of Billiard Marker, Blackleg, and Blackguard, since you challenge me to speak plainly.'

'I am afraid I know the man. Gentleman Jack he called himself when I saw him for a few moments with Stephen. Did you not turn him out?'

'Oh, pray, pardon me; he is Stephen's friend. He said so before, and Stephen confirmed it. He says so now, and waits to see him.'

'Has Stephen been told.'

'Yes, and he merely says, "Let him wait."'

'Where is Stephen now?'

'Engaged, I believe, as usual at this time of day, in the manly and intellectual occupation of battledore and shuttlecock.'

'Will you kindly send him to me?'

Lord Harlaxton, having shot not merely his bolt but all his bolts, had time to note the effect. The countess kept her temper in admirable control. She had not once

given way to the provocation and angry excitement his words were calculated to produce; but there was in her look, in her eye, in every tone of her voice, and in every inflection of her attitude, something that warned him he had gone too far, and prompted him to modify the statements he had made.

'My dear mother—'

'Will you please send Stephen to me, and without a moment's loss of time?' she said, interrupting him; then taking up a letter that lay on the table, she turned to the window, and began to read.

Just for one moment Lord Harlaxton was about to give vent to his irritation, but the old warning had come back to him so strongly, without repetition in words, that after a pause he turned, and went to fulfil his errand through the steward.

CHAPTER XV.

I AM BUT WHAT YOU HAVE MADE ME.

WHEN the earl had left the room, the countess put down the letter which she had appeared to read, although the contents were known to her, and unimportant, and stood with her hands pressed against her face for some little time; partly in emotion which she was struggling to repress, partly in the desire to shut out the world and all that belonged to it, save and except the one image which epitomised to her all that the world contained of sweet savour—the image of Stephen, who would presently be

here, and whom she must now meet as she never before had met him.

The time for indulgence had passed; he was nearly of age, when all must be made known to him, even if she delayed till then. Now, if ever, he must play a manly part; and exhibit those virtues which she had hitherto given him credit for, without too curiously inquiring into their existence, but which alone could afford a solid base for all she desired to build upon them; and without which, she saw plainly, her every hope and plan must go to speedy wreck.

This was the hour she had been recently waiting for through so many weary days and sleepless nights. Why then, when it had come, did she tremble and turn pale, as she saw she was doing, when she glanced at her face in the mirror? Away with omens! She must and would succeed!

There was a gentle tap at the door, and without waiting for a call Stephen entered; battledore and shuttlecock in

hand; both which he laid down on the table, as he saw his mother standing there, and advanced to kiss her, with an easy, careless air, and a smile that made even the spring fade to the fond mother's heart as she gazed on him, and waited for him to speak.

'Glad to hear your are doing so well to-day. Is it true?'

There was a slight pause before the countess answered, and the tone was strangely pathetic for the matter.

'Yes, I think and hope I am doing well.'

'And you intend to keep so?'

'If I can,' she answered, with an almost imperceptible sigh.

'Oh, that's easy. May I tell you how?'

'Certainly. It was my privilege once to teach you. It may be yours now to teach me.'

'That's nonsense, mother?'

'Then what is good sense?'

'Look!'

He took his battledore and shuttlecock, and began to play, with such seeming assurance it was a perfectly right thing to do, that the countess hardly knew whether she was most annoyed by the frivolity, or charmed with the picturesque grace of his attitudes, and his entire command of the implements of his sport.

'There!' he exclaimed, as presently he ceased to play. 'Do that for a few minutes every day, and I promise you health and amusement.'

'And is it possible you spend much time in this fashion?'

'Why not? If life be a kind of magnet, with a certain choice of our own as to the poles, mine are as good as most men's.'

'And yours are—'

'Billiards at one end, and *this* at the other;' and therewith he sent the feathered toy with so delicate a stroke, and such accurate aim, that it fell like a living thing

right upon the countess's breast, who laughingly caught it.

'From billiards,' continued Stephen, 'I learn to discipline my eye, hand, and aim; to be patient and unmoved in defeat; and to learn the folly of knocking life's balls about without defined purpose—'

'And yours is—'

'Ah, I haven't got to that! So much, mother, for billiards. Now for the battledore and shuttlecock. The game straightens one's legs, and one's mind, after stoopings of all kinds, physical and moral; begets activity, concentrates a day's exercise into an hour, and keeps a good reckoning for you with your friends and enemies.'

'How is that?'

'Why, I think of a good fellow, and I strike almost as genially as if I shook his hand; or of a pretty girl, and the flowing curves partake of her own grace; or of a shabby, mean-spirited creature, and I dismiss him with the contempt of a back-

handed stroke; or of a real, downright hateful fellow, a man one can call an enemy, and I *do* strike!—well, as he would not like to be stricken. I'd show you if we were in the hall, and you didn't mind the skylight.'

'Well, Stephen, if for me life's poles could be as you say, billiards at one end, and battledore and shuttlecock—'

'Say health and amusement,' interrupted Stephen. 'It's a little more scientific—and details you know can be arranged to tastes.'

'If my objects then could be mainly or entirely the seeking of my own health and amusement, I willingly own you have given me something to say in defence of them. But waiving that for the present, I wish to point out to you disadvantages you seem not to have taken into account. Sit down here by me.'

Stephen came, but instead of the chair she indicated, he took a footstool, and sat by her side; his grave, eager, inquisitive

eye contradicting the easy, indifferent, unexpectant air he assumed.

'Do you know what men say of you?'

'What do they say?'

'That you are a trifler—that you care for nothing serious—have no ambition, and look on the glories of your ancestry as but so much dust and ashes.'

'Did I ever pretend to care for any of these things?'

'No, but is it not time to begin to deal with them as great realities?'

'It might be—for other men!'

'And why not for you?'

'Because you have taught me otherwise.'

'I taught you! Stephen, you forget yourself!'

'No, mother, it is you who forget. I would have gone to Eton, but you kept me at home. I would have been a soldier, but you refused to let me obtain a commission; and when my brother, with ever memorable condescension, got me a post as attaché at St Petersburg, and thought

no doubt with a happy conscience he had fairly set me up for life, and that that matter was off his mind, you were so frightened by the distance, and the cold, and I don't remember how many other obstacles, that you gave *me* no peace (which I might not have minded), but also gave yourself none, till I said, "Well, mother, have it your own way," and you had.'

'You wound me deeply!'

'Why so? I haven't complained. I'm not going to complain. How do I know you were not perfectly right? A kinder mother does not live, nor a truer lady, nor a wiser and better woman, if I judge by her relations with everybody else. Who am I then to doubt her dealings with me? Whenever anything of that kind does come creeping in, I say to myself, "Would such a mother keep me, and train me, so that I must become what you say men call me, a trifler, if she had not felt assured I was fit for nothing else? And yet she loves

me all the same! And see how happy I have been!'

The growing irony of his tone, deepening into the bitter mockery of these last words, needed not the accompanying look to drive them home to the heart of the anguished and conscience-stricken mother.

'O Stephen! Stephen! You are very cruel. You do not know, nor can I yet tell you, things that are indispensable to right judgment of me. But oh! my boy, does not my life-long love answer you? Can you not feel in *that* how strong must be my defence?'

'Be content then. I did not come to say these things, but because you sent for me. Tell me what you want, and I shall try to please you? Only don't ask me to produce grapes where the soil gives only a meaner vegetation.'

The countess, while unable to restrain her tears, was too sharp sighted not to perceive under all his seeming sense of personal insignificance, a something that

augured well for his future, and she took what comfort she could from this source.

For a little time there was silence on both sides. Seeing how deeply she was agitated, Stephen took his mother's hand in an undemonstrative way, and thus aided the countess in her wish to check the rush of thought and impulse calling her to defend herself from reproaches she had never expected to hear, but which she felt were not absolutely undeserved. So she abruptly changed the subject.

'Where is Miss Vandeleur?'

'Gone shopping, I suppose.'

'Alone?'

'No; with the earl.'

'And you allowed her to do this?'

'I? That's my brother's affair, not mine.'

'What if it might be yours?'

Stephen turned suddenly towards his mother's face to see if he had heard rightly. She tried to meet his glance unmoved,

but coloured a little, and that was enough to bring the blood in a rush to Stephen's face. He started to his feet, and seemed for the moment as if he were about to leave the room without a word. But if so he changed his mind, and said,—

'Mother, be so good as never to repeat what you have just now said, either to me or any other person in the world.'

'Why?'

'Why! Is it not a question of honour?'

'My dear boy, you are quite agitated.'

'Pooh! Nothing of the kind! You interrupted me in my exercise. I shall go and finish.'

He took his battledore and shuttlecock with an air that showed he was now very determinedly going away.

'Stephen!' murmured the low sweet voice of his mother. He did not appear to hear, and reached the door.

'Stephen!' again was called, and with scarcely any increase of loudness in the tone; as if the countess's heart told her he

must hear her plainly enough, and would surely stop before it was too late.

She looked, and he was gone.

Stephen had gone, but his heart quickly revolted against so leaving his mother, and he returned to her.

Even in the brief time that had elapsed while he was away from the countess, he had changed his expression—recovered his ordinary attitude—and was able to say with a smile,—

'It's very absurd this taking of things seriously; but as I don't often err in that way, I suppose you can forgive me?'

'Yes, if you will listen!'

'If I do, remember it is simply because you ask me!'

As he said this, he placed both his hands on the table, and leaned over it, so near to her, that she felt certain whatever he might say, he was deeply interested in the subject, and bent on the study of her tell-tale features the while.

'You said it was a question of honour. Suppose I could find a way honourably to settle that, and leave it no longer a question?'

'Mother, I do not care for such flights of fancy. They are like those of my shuttlecock, easy to send up, but certain to come quickly to the ground.'

'But if I do what I say?'

'Then—yes, then I'll think of it.'

'You like her?'

'Very much—when I can find time.'

'Do you consider her good looking?'

'No.'

'Stephen, you amaze me!'

'Ah, that's because you don't wait to the end. I was going to add—because she is so much more.'

'I think her lovely!

'Tastes differ.'

'But yours?'

'Minds its own business. Once more, mother, I tell you I am quite sure this is not mine.'

'What! not even if the young lady differed from that opinion?'

Startled, a little confused, but anxious before everything else to keep his mother from any progress in the delicate path she had chosen, Stephen answered brusquely, almost rudely,—

'As I don't think the young lady has any one settled opinion of her own, she is scarcely entitled to meddle with that belonging to anybody else.'

'For so young a man you seem strangely harsh in your judgments.'

'I suppose it's through not getting tamed by conflict with the world, which, you know, you didn't approve of.'

It was too much. The countess ros in anger and deep distress, and was about, with passionate vehemence, to say a few words, and resign for ever the things for which she alone now cared to live; but Stephen moved in turn, anticipated her, and said with faltering voice,—

'I am sorry. I will be more careful.

Tell me what you wish. I will not if I can help it again interrupt you.'

He then stood by her side, his face turned a little away.

'You are poor. And whatever I can do for you will not make you rich. Miss Vandeleur's fortune would. That is one thing.

'She is a lovely girl, not yet knowing her own heart and mind, with much of the brightness of youth, and of high spirits, fond of the despotism which beauty tends to create, but no sort of evil in her, and no faults but such as time, experience, and, above all, the care and love of a worthy husband will no doubt remove.

'When she came here, I told her in the plainest words to consider herself free.'

'Did you tell my brother that?' sharply interposed Stephen.

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because he would have thought my act had been done in hostility to him.

And I did not tell you for the opposite reason, that it might have led to baseless dreams. In fine the young lady herself was a stranger to me in all essentials; and therefore I did no more than was required to put her at ease, and relieve her from an embarrassing position which she had done nothing to create.'

'And why do you tell me now?'

Such was the question the countess waited to hear, and wanted, but it came not.

Stephen was strangely silent, but looked so much more troubled than pleased, that the countess, striving to guess what was passing in his heart, concluded that his habit of self-depreciation, if partly assumed to anticipate unfavourable opinion from others, had ended by making him believe in his low estimates of himself.

'And what practically do you wish me to do?' he said, breaking the long silence, when he found his mother would not.

'Be respectful and attentive to her, which at present you are not. Study her

in a kindly spirit. Don't frighten her by a random and caustic speech, just after opening her heart by a kind one.'

'Will that suffice to win Miss Vandeleur?'

'No, or else I suppose you would say she is not worth winning?'

Stephen smiled as if his mother was not far wrong there, but there was little of sunshine in his smile as he asked,—

'What else, then?'

'May I tell you frankly?'

'Yes.'

'You have been the youth, you now must be the man; with a man's dignity of aim, of methods, and behaviour. Your debts must somehow be paid, and it must not be possible henceforth for the world to say you are hunted by duns; that you take your friends from the meanest and most worthless outcasts of society, or allow them to take you; that—oh, Stephen, how shall I tell you? The word profligate has even been applied to you!'

'By whom? But I know. The earl!

You dare not deny it! He lies! I beg his pardon—he is a great personage, and can only be mistaken.'

'I was sure of it. And he will be so too.'

'I can wait.'

'Will you, my very dear boy, think all this over, and—'

'Let me recollect. Miss Vandeleur is to have the care and love of a worthy husband, and so to have her faults cured. And you do me the honour to think that, in order to win so enviable a prize, I have only to be attentive, and avoid frightening her on the one hand, and only to take care on the other that I become conspicuous alike for dignity and virtue. Unhappily there is one difficulty.'

'None that we may not together conquer!'

'And yet it is together the difficulty has grown. Mother, I am fit for no such programme. I am but that which you yourself have made me!'

The countess gazed at him for a single moment, then rose, and in intense feeling was about to go away without another word being spoken, but she stopped at the door to say,—

'Madman! Blind madman that you are! not to see that, whether your charge be true or false, I have been devoting all that remains to me of life to undo the evil work!'

The last word had scarcely left her lips before Stephen was about to speak, but saw she had left him.

CHAPTER XVI.

GENTLEMAN JACK GETS AN INSTALMENT FROM FORTUNE.

STEPHEN, for some time after his mother's departure, gazed at the open door trying to satisfy himself that he had done rightly, but not feeling very successful. Was she, as she said, devoting her last days of life to undoing the mischief that had been wrought? Had he spoken too strongly, when for the first time he spoke at all out of the overflowing bitterness of his heart?

These and similar questions troubled him. But he felt he must put them away with the strong hand, if he was to carry

out his long-pondered design of making an effectual change; and try whether he had the strength and manliness to work out his own redemption, after leading such a self-indulging life.

In this mood, dissatisfied alike with himself and his mother, but feeling his heart reproach him so strongly with regard to her that he would be sure to fall back on the old state of things, if he did not shut out for a time that disturbing element, he moved gloomily from the room, and descended the staircase; but stopped on the way, musing, to look out of an open window, that commanded a street along one side of the house.

Suddenly his attention was drawn to Gentleman Jack on the opposite side, who had caught sight of him; and was signalling to him in so conspicuous a manner, as would speedily attract the attention of everybody near, if not stopped.

With something like an oath, Stephen waved his hand in answer to warn him

away; and Gentleman Jack, not knowing but there might be obstacles to a meeting just then, ceased his demonstrations, but only to hurry towards the gate which happened to be open.

Stephen, on his part, also hurried his footsteps, to see that he was kept out.

Swiftly as Stephen moved, Gentleman Jack was the winner of the impromptu race; and pushing the servants aside who obstructed him, with the assertion,—

'Mr Stephen has called me, and is waiting for me;' he got into the hall, and thence into the saloon, where he met Stephen face to face.

'Jack,' at once began the latter, stifling the anger and annoyance he felt, 'You asked my advice. I give it briefly. Do as I mean to do—turn over a new leaf! There's half a sovereign to help. And so, farewell!'

He went to the door leading to the hall, opened it, and waited Gentleman Jack's departure.

That personage took the money, looked at it, pocketed it, and then changing his whole manner, and the ordinary tones of his voice, he asked menacingly,—

'And is that all you have got to say to me?'

'Well, I could add something if you provoked me,' was Stephen's reply.

'It wouldn't be wise. I came here in the best of tempers, but I too can be provoked.'

'Really! How?'

'By your forgetting my present difficulty is your work!'

'Mine, you scoundrel!'

'Ah, bad words are often like the prickly shell of the chestnut, with much goodness inside for the hand determined to get it out. Let me ask you one question:—What sort of life do you suppose I have been leading since you have known me?'

'Well, to put it mildly, a damnable one!'

'But spent mainly in your service, as your minister and tool. Half a friend in counsel, half a spaniel to fetch and carry. I don't think I was quite an angel of virtue before we became acquainted, but if I have gone damnably to the bad since then, who has helped me on the road by making it pleasant and profitable? Look you, Mr Chandos Stephen Froude, it mayn't be a pleasant thing to say, but it's a true and wholesome one, it is you who have helped to make me what I am!'

Conscience-struck, thus to have the very essence of his own severe and heart-piercing words to his mother—'I am but what you have made me'—retorted on him by the irony of Fate, and through such a voice, Stephen took two or three turns up and down the saloon; and then came to where Gentleman Jack stood, waiting in silent expectancy for the end of the explosion he had brought on; gathering himself together in hostile mood for whatever was about to happen.

Stephen's face, however, as he approached, was indicative of a change quite as remarkable as the one Gentleman Jack had lately passed through, but in a precisely opposite direction.

'You have hurt me, Jack, more than I like to speak of, more than you could have intended. But no matter.'

He stopped, and drew forth his purse.

'Behold my whole stock, six sovereigns. Take half. Send me your new address, and if I can do something to start you afresh, I will.'

The last two words were so decisively spoken that they carried conviction at once to the listener.

'There! Now, am I like the traveller who keeps close his armour of wrappings when assailed by the tempest, but at once unbosoms to the first taste of sunshine!'

They shook hands before he went on, and then Gentleman Jack said,—

'I won't say I am grateful, for somehow

words don't carry me so far as they used to do, but I'll prove it. A creditor is lying in wait for you, has been again and again to the earl, your brother, who refused to pay; and so treated the dun that he went away swearing he would arrest you before the earl's very eyes, and disgrace the whole family.'

'I know!' said Stephen, with a laugh; 'and I am strongly inclined to take a holiday somewhere, while his excitement cools down.'

'What! immediately?' demanded Gentleman Jack, with eager interest.

'Perhaps to-day; perhaps not for several days; but hold your tongue!'

'Catch me blabbing! Can I be of any service?'

Again Stephen took one of his walks to and fro, as if to get a brief space for reflection apart from Gentleman Jack. Presently returning, he said,—

'Could you wait about, unobserved, for two or three hours during the mornings

of this week, to take a portmanteau to a cab waiting round the corner?'

'For your sake I could forget I am a gentleman born and bred, put on a livery, and be your faithful servant evermore!'

'Will carrying the portmanteau to the corner do for the present?' asked Stephen, with a smile.

'Fortune is heavily in my books, and I mean to make her pay. But if she prefers to begin with instalments, I am not the man to object.'

'Mark, then,' responded Stephen, 'I will give you a signal from the hall window where you—'

'The choice of windows is not in good taste. But proceed.'

'If I simply open the two sashes and slowly close them again I shall have changed my mind, and you can go away. But if, when they are open, I shake my handkerchief as if I were accidentally shaking it out, then take this card to the groom in the stable-yard, whose name

is written on it, and he will give you the portmanteau.'

'I know. The portmanteau being our baggage, the handkerchief is at once the signal and the flag under which we march to glory.'

And there they separated.

CHAPTER XVII.

MOMENTS OF DANGER.

THE interview between Stephen and his mother, which had brought him seriously to contemplate an immediate and secret departure from his home, had been even more terrible in its conclusion for her.

'So ends my dream!' she murmured to herself, as she paced to and fro the corridor. 'All is lost. I have now nothing to live for but to watch the progress of the wreck, and my own disgrace and humiliation!'

Seeing him pass from her room on his way to the staircase—making no attempt

again to speak to her, or modify his language—the incident, slight as it was, gave new poignancy and danger to all her thoughts.

'He has stricken, and now abandons me!' she thought, as she re-entered her room, sat down on the nearest chair, and for a little space was silent, reviewing all the features of the position in the light of her own desperate state, and half frantic thoughts and imaginings.

Suddenly she became conscious of what she was doing; and by clasping with both hands her breast, tried to still the beatings of her heart, which began to give their old solemn warning.

In so doing she touched the ruby heart-shaped gem that lay there, took it in her fingers, looked at it, and in another moment broke out in low, hysterical cries; revealing such passionate distress and anguish, that for a time it seemed as if her every sense was helping to drive her into some mad outbreak tending to swift de-

struction. And when that state ceased, it was only to let her subside into one of greater danger, by its quietly reckless abandonment of all natural safeguards, and tendencies to self-preservation.

'Oh, my sister!' thus ran her thoughts, 'when I forced this poison-chalice from thy desperate hands, didst thou ever afterwards fear lest I too might be tempted? Thou still hadst me to guard thee from the fatal draught. I stand alone. No sister, husband, and now no son to help or save! Can I live dishonoured? Why, that is death indeed, without death's peaceful balm. One drop from this ends all. Oh, sweet Heaven, forgive the madness of a breaking heart!'

She opened the secret receptacle, smelt the contents, as if to fortify her own resolve by the deleterious odour, stopped, and dallied as it were, with death.

It was at that moment when death or life seemed to hang before her vision as the scales of some supernatural balance,

which the slightest mental touch on one side or the other might in an instant bring to an end, that she heard the voice of Stephen calling to her in gentle tones from the threshold of the door behind, which he had just opened, unheard,—

'Mother!'

It was magical. The ruby heart was instantly closed; a prayer in the wildest agitation went up to God for mercy from that other living and suffering heart; and was followed by the consciousness she was saved at least from the wickedness of suicide. And then swiftly succeeded a sense of the imperious necessity that Stephen must not know.

Striving to compose herself before allowing him to see her face, Stephen—unconscious of the awful crisis his mother had passed through, and thinking her seeming attitude of reserve showed simply her continuing anger and resentment, spoke and looked more calmly than he would otherwise have done.

'Mother! I will do what you wish. But trifler as I am, I can neither trifle myself nor Miss Vandeleur into marriage, without our both knowing well what we are about.'

'That is all I ever wished!' said the countess, turning towards him a face suddenly illumined. 'Oh, Stephen,' she said, in accents that trembled with her excitement and agitation, 'you know not what lies in your words,—the relief, the comfort, the boundless hope and joy they call forth!'

She rose to meet and embrace him, but so tottered on the way that she would have fallen had not Stephen seen the danger, caught, and supported her.

'Mother, dearest mother!' how you tremble. And your face looks so strangely. You have been ill again, and you are striving to conceal it from me.'

'No, no, no! I am only too happy, and that makes me afraid. I have been so wretched. Have had such bad thoughts. But now I could laugh!'

And as if to prove the truth of her words, she did laugh hysterically, perhaps giving way to the instinctive impulse in order to disguise her state, and keep Stephen from suspecting what she had been thinking to do, and but for his coming, might perhaps have accomplished.

'Pray, be calm,' he said, in loving, earnest tones.

'I will, presently, but my relief, my happiness, is so great that it must find vent!' and no longer able to maintain even a show of calmness, she again broke out in violent hysteric mirth before she could stop herself; while Stephen, attributing everything to his own action in first causing his mother bitter disappointment, and then to the reaction through his present attitude, thought it wisest to let nature have her own way, and then all would soon be well.

And so far the countess justified his expectations. Believing, and rightly, that he had no suspicion of what it was that

really so affected her, she gradually recovered her equanimity, and after a few minutes said, with a smile,—

'Well, now to seek Miss Vandeleur!'

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NEW USE FOR NATURAL HISTORY.

KNOWING Miss Vandeleur was in the house, but caring to put no questions to the servants, lest they might begin to suspect, and make their comments, Stephen passed successively through every place where she was at all likely to be without finding her; omitting one room only — the last to be thought of—the library.

He was at once annoyed and amused that he had not, and for very good reasons, thought of the place where it was so natural, or ought to be, that she might

go; but where he knew she did not habitually go, any more than himself.

The library was richly stored with the literature of all past times, and was constantly supplemented, under the care of a gentleman who filled the double post of librarian and private secretary to the earl, with the best works of the best modern authors in all the European languages.

But the newest fashionable novels found no place there to tempt Miss Vandeleur; and sports and exercises were no less unrepresented for Stephen's solace or information.

Thus Mr Caxton, the librarian, whose mind, like his name and years, tended to suggest to both the literature of antiquity when either had any occasion to resort to him for advice, was left as the chief enjoyer of the stores he was supposed to guard simply for the benefit of others.

It was, therefore, with a curiously-mixed feeling of mirth and shame that Stephen

found himself on the way to the library; not to use it for its own noble purposes in his own method, or to give Mr Caxton an unusual pleasure by asking for a book, taking his advice as to what book it should be, and then sitting down manfully to study it in an appreciative spirit, but simply to invent some excuse for learning if Miss Vandeleur was there.

He laughed as he thought how the worthy man would be surprised if they both should at one and the same hour visit him, and both on false pretences.

On entering he saw Mr Caxton, poring as usual over a black-letter folio, but he saw no Miss Vandeleur.

He was about to retire unnoticed, when it occurred to him that if she did so strange a thing as to come here at all, she might commit the still more startling act of sitting down in one of the bays to read.

Thinking of that, he wondered whether he should find her so engaged, over a

genuine book; one in which, however interesting in itself, were combined those deeper elements that alone can give true value and dignity to any department of literature worthy of the name.

That would be a surprise, and give shame to his ungenerous thoughts of her unfitness for, and indisposition to, any such serious enjoyments or efforts.

He was soon relieved of any doubts he might feel on that score. The bays which ran along one side of the library, each lighted by a window, and filled with books in two opposite ranges of shelves, with a marquetry table and writing materials between, invited him to explore further.

So he went on, and exchanged greetings with Mr Caxton, whose face beamed with pleasure (and Stephen thought something else) as he looked through his glasses at the unwonted visitor.

'It is not a compliment to you, Mr Caxton, as I feel rather ashamed to own, that finding myself dull elsewhere I come

here, of all places in the world. Ennui, I suppose, like poverty, brings one acquainted with strange bedfellows, so I for one propose to make acquaintance with a book.'

'Mr Stephen is always amusing, but, unlike the rest of the world, he often amuses himself at his own expense, and if he will permit me to say so, unjustly. I doubt if there be one among Mr Stephen's acquaintances who has read so many books as he.'

'Among Mr Stephen's acquaintances,' responded the young man, in a cynical tone. 'Ah, well, that may be. But pray, if you really think I do read—'

'And books worth reading, too, I am sure,' interrupted Mr Caxton.

'Then pray tell it not in Gath—publish it not in the streets of Askelon,' responded Stephen, with a laugh, 'or I shall lose caste; and I can't afford to lose anything.'

And again there was a jarring tone at this recurrence to the thought of

poverty, which had only too deep a meaning for the speaker. His allowance of five hundred a-year from his mother was always spent before the time came round for the next quarter's receipts; then he went into debt, and found himself obliged to stay there; a victim to usurers, from whom he saw no present chance of escape.

'And what book would you like?' asked Mr Caxton.

'I suppose I ought to select the "Morte d'Arthur," or possibly some useful book; but if I am to progress as a literary student I must draw it mild, and have something that condescends to my lower tastes.'

'Mr Stephen is famous in sports. Would he like to look at Lady Juliana Berner's "Boke of Huntyng"?'

'With all respect to the lady, I should prefer an acquaintance not quite so many centuries old.'

'Ah, yes, I see. Sports bring men into familiarity with animals, even if it be only

to shoot them as game, or hunt them as wild animals, or angle for them as fish, or trap them as songster birds, or as insects to be preserved for their beauty. Perhaps you would like to glance into the natural history of some of these? There is much of interest to be found, where few persons ever look for it, in the natural habits and wonderful structure of many of these creatures.'

Mr Caxton was fond of talk when the subject interested him, and his listener content to listen;—which Stephen hardly was from the moment the conversation seemed to go hopelessly astray from Miss Vandeleur.

But as the librarian said these last words, there came for the second time a humorous expression into his face, which always expressed decidedly any one of the few things it was capable of expressing. So again Stephen wondered, and then a thought came like a gleam of lightning, though agreeable

as a gleam of sunshine. Miss Vandeleur was here! and the librarian was enjoying the farce of Mr Stephen's new desire to read, while seeing a very different motive.

A second thought, which sent a corresponding gleam over his own face, in the shape of a smile, caused Stephen to ask,—

'And what department of so large and interesting a field would you recommend to begin with—insects?'

And he looked with a penetrating glance at Mr Caxton, who was nearly laughing right out as he replied,—

'Well, that is a subject Miss Vandeleur is now interesting herself in!'

'What! here?' ejaculated Stephen, with sparkling eyes, brimming over with mirth and expectation.

'Yes, in the fifth bay.'

'And what precise subject has she chosen?' asked Stephen, in a lower tone.

'A book on moths,' answered the librarian, also speaking low.

'Ah! Very interesting creatures, no doubt. But give me butterflies!'

Whether the 'give me' was only a rhetorical expression of feeling, or an actual request for an actual book, Mr Caxton decided to make it mean the latter; fetched a volume, and discreetly withdrew to muse over so unaccustomed a meeting on his own peculiar domain.

Had Miss Vandeleur overheard?—was the question that immediately occurred to Stephen; and made him pause for a single instant to consider what he had said, which assumed sudden importance when looked at as affecting what she might think.

She was so near, and the two men had spoken so freely without restraining their voices, that Stephen concluded that she must have heard, and was willing to go on hearing, instead of at once coming forward, and making known her presence, since the librarian did not.

Did that mean that she wanted him to remain in ignorance of her visit whilst collecting, as he guessed, ammunition for the next verbal war; the nature of which he had now discovered—an attack upon him, under the guise of an attack upon moths in general?

Or, on the contrary, was she going on with her preparations up to the last moment, so as to make them the more effective before he should come to her—and resume the indecisive battle of the billiard-room? . . . .

After a very hurried perusal of a few pages—and the making a few pencil memoranda from them, which his retentive memory enabled him to realise sufficiently for his purpose, supplemented as they would be by his own imagination, where the facts might fail him or become a little mixed and confused, he put the book in his pocket—moved forward, and presently came face to face with Miss Vandeleur. . . . . .

She was standing at the window, with quite another book in her hand than the one on moths, which Stephen saw lying on the table, covered by a handkerchief hastily thrown over it for concealment, as though she had not heard the librarian's mention of it, which indeed was the truth.

Her face flushed a little as she met his glance, but her manner and voice remained undisturbed, as she said with a smile,—

'I am going to turn blue stocking;' and therewith she showed him the title-page of the book, which he read aloud:—

'"Locke on the Understanding!"'

'No doubt you will think it will prove quite another kind of lock to my understanding.'

'I am not so rude. You have selected, no doubt, an excellent book, though not one usually chosen for first steps in learning. But I see the corner of another. Permit me to look, and benefit by your choice.'

Hastily drawing away the handkerchief,

he revealed her literary armoury, and exclaimed in well-feigned surprise,—

'What? Moths!'

This was a sharp home-thrust to begin with, and somewhat disconcerted Miss Vandeleur's plan of operations for the campaign. She laughed it off, however, and replied,—

'You forget. You call yourself a Moth. And I cannot with propriety address myself directly to the study of so wise and clever a gentleman in his own person. So I take the next best step, and study him through his representatives, while acknowledging him as the prince of them all!'

'The flattery is irresistible!' exclaimed Stephen, laughing heartily to see how she extricated herself.

'Only remember,' she added, 'there are two phases of progress—the learning to imitate, and the learning to avoid.'

'True. Is it not odd that, moved, I suppose, by exactly the same impulse, I

have taken to studying the natural history of a butterfly?'

'Say butterflies, if you don't wish to be personal,' retorted Miss Vandeleur.

'I prefer to stick to one butterfly. And although yet a novice, I have learned that no finer lesson could be given to any fine and fashionable lady than she might derive from the study of the ups and downs, the fugitive glory, and the deathly gloom, of the life she loves, as exemplified in that of the butterfly, while acknowledging it to be the most beautiful of all insects.'

'In the name of all fine and fashionable ladies, and of the whole of my fortunate sex, allow me to thank you for so great a compliment—in likening us to the "most beautiful of all insects.'" And therewith she made him a low curtsey.

'Ay, it's all very well in summer weather and bright sunshine; but think of the winter, when you are all turned to grubs! The one in dreary country houses; the other in their temporary graves.'

'We must be content to remember moths are no better off.'

'But think, when the bright season is over, how soiled are the lovely wings! What havoc is made of the beauty! How the brilliant creatures descend to solitude, or the grave, and become—one in fact, the other in feeling—mere caterpillars! But let us change so painful a subject.'

'But,' said Miss Vandeleur, taking up his theme where he wanted to end it, 'the skin splits, and once more there is the free, happy, glorious creature, revelling in the sunshine, thinking — happy butterfly!— only of the flowers, and the sweet life before it.' She stopped for a single instant; then with an arch look she repeated his words, exactly imitating his mock gravity of manner, but with an added comicality of her own that was to Stephen irresistible, 'But let us change so painful a subject!'

'As the boy says,' returned Stephen, when he has thrown his stone, hit his

antagonist, and does not want to trouble the poor fellow with the necessity of making any reply.'

'Strike, then,' said Miss Vandeleur with bold audacity.

'No, you disarm me, when you so frankly lay yourself open. But what I was about to say was rather to comfort you. I mean as a grub. Is it not worth while to pass through even so mean and sordid a state, if only to get rid of the fair wings that have been so soiled; obtain a long period of calm reflection, undisturbed from without; and so prepare possibly to be an improved butterfly? Science shows new wonders every day. It is quite within the region of possibilities that I may some day see a *greatly improved butterfly*.'

For a single instant did Stephen allow his glance to fall on Miss Vandeleur's face; but her eyes seemed to dart fire, and his own did not wait to see whether from resentment or otherwise.

'If you are going to play the Moralist Censor, while only pretending to be a cynic moth, let me from my book here read you a warning beforehand.'

She opened the book, which was studded at intervals with projecting slips of paper to mark particular places, and turning to the first of these, read—'The small Cicado—'

'Is that a moth?' interrupted Stephen.

'Allied,' responded Miss Vandeleur, as she went on with a humorous intonation that gave force and piquancy to the words:—'The small cicado has the power of producing a shrill and ear-piercing sound, so loud in many species that it can be heard at considerable distances, and which becomes a positive nuisance, like a tune prolonged for several hours without intermission.'

'I humbly accept the warning, and must not risk the fearful consequence. But I trust I am in little danger. My observations so far have only extended

to a few traits illustrative of butterfly tastes in dress, and one or two other matters that may be tedious to speak of, however briefly.'

'When Mr Stephen does become tedious, I shall look to see whether the skies may be about to fall. But apart from that; what woman can fail to be interested in so large and captivating a subject as the butterfly's costume, and wardrobe?'

'Well,' responded Stephen, as he looked steadily at Miss Vandeleur's garb; an out-of-door dress, the most conspicuous feature of which was a sort of Newmarket jacket, experimentally introduced by Miss Vandeleur before its proper date into an unprepared state of society, and just put on for the first time. A jacket in which a more decided advance was made to the appearance of a man's coat than Stephen had ever seen before, or ever wished to see again. So he began,—

'When Linnæus was classifying and naming certain classes of butterflies, he

went grandly to work, and chose his appellations from the heroes of the Trojan war. One, a male, was to be a Greek, and called Polycaon. Another a Trojan, a female, be named Laodocus. But when he had thus suggested their mortal hatreds and combative nationalities, he discovered that the two were only male and female of the same insect, and no doubt the best of friends! Now, perhaps it was the wearing of a butterfly jacket, fit for either sex, that so misled him.'

Miss Vandeleur could not help laughing, though annoyed at his reception of her new garment, which she had expected, if touched upon at all, would be greatly admired. The shaft went right home; and for the moment was not replied to.

'How warm the day gets!' she remarked after a pause, 'though there is no sun. I was going out, but cannot think of running away now, when I see my æsthetic improvement is so earnestly

engaging Mr Stephen Froude's attention and talent.'

And with that she took off her coat, laid it across the back of her chair, and looked at him ; but whether as offering the garment up in sacrifice and extenuation, or as defiantly meaning to suggest she should put it on again as soon as it suited her, Stephen could not divine.

Miss Vandeleur now appeared in a new close-fitting brown gown, which would have been sombre but for some kind of gold embroidery of flowers that were hardly visible in the shade, while gleaming like burnished gold when and wherever the sun touched it.

Drawing fresh inspiration from the change in the character of the dress, and remorselessly pursuing the even tenor of his way, he began to tell her of a butterfly with what he called an inviting name—Helicopis Cupido—and particularly emphasised the Cupido.

'When you first look at it, supposing

it strange to you, you might hardly find it arrest your attention. But on turning it over, or, in other words looking at it from different sides, as you know we often do, when men and women are the subjects of our study, it proves to be a really wonderful insect. On the lower wings, or say the means by which she soars through life, on a ground of ochreous yellow are a large number of spots, which look exactly as if they were made of gold leaf artificially affixed to the wings. Now, is that not a very unfeeling bit of satire on Mother Nature's part against her petted darling, the rich heiress?'

'That is capital!' said Miss Vandeleur. 'But I can find you an heiress-seeker to match. The hornet moth is sluggish and indulgent in its habits; if it were a man, he would, like the poet Thomson, put his hands in his pockets, and take a bite out of a peach from the wall. It is, in fact, often found balancing in the air

while sipping the sweets of flowers, no doubt passing from one to another that it may not cloy. But I own the insect and the human likeness ceases at one point—there are no insect heiresses, I imagine, for even a hornet to attack.'

Stephen thought to himself there was more acidity than genial humour in these words, and hastened on,—

'Well, now we've done with dress, and—'

She interrupted him tartly,—

'I can't, if I would, again change my dress to please you, and I would not if I could.'

'As Miss Vandeleur is always charming in whatever dress it pleases her to assume, the outside world can only look, admire, and ask, What next?'

'And that I ask you?'

'I fear you attribute to my simple remarks meanings I disclaim. Let me offer you a more pleasing example. The butterfly Midamus is a dull brown, and

inconspicuous till light falls diagonally upon its wings. Then it changes, as by magic, into imperial purple of a richness exceeding human power to imitate, and more than realises the metamorphosis achieved by the fairy grandmother's wand.'

'The light that was so magical in its effect,' said Miss Vandeleur, recovering her serenity with a smile, and after another hasty glance at her book, 'was perhaps the light of the convolvolus hawk moth's eyes, which, I am told here, shine brilliantly at night.'

She looked so innocently unconscious of any undercurrent of purpose in saying this, that Stephen did not venture to assume she referred to or thought of the provocation of the billiard-room, concerning his nocturnal habits, and his consequent attempt to kiss her; and she, on her part, if she did remember, took care to give him no look or sign that might encourage him to renew his attempt.

'The habits and physiognomy of butter-

flies are in some respects odd and suggestive,' continued Stephen. 'For instance, take the Peacock Butterfly. When it thinks itself in danger it flies straightway to some spot, such as a tree trunk, or old paling (or behind a step ladder, he would like to have said, but did not), closes its wings over its back, and remains motionless. The wide expanse of bright colour seen a moment before is suddenly replaced by a flat, dark, leaf-like object, which looks more like a piece of bark torn from the tree than an insect.'

'Lucky insect to be able so suddenly to defeat an enemy!' remarked Miss Vandeleur, interrupting him.

'This apparent vanishing of the butterfly has always a rather startling effect, even to those who are accustomed to it; the large brilliant creature disappearing as mysteriously, as if annihilated, or covered with the cloud of darkness.'

'Simple butterfly, why did it not learn from the moth?' asked Miss Vandeleur.

'Here is an example for her.' She read from the book: '"The Humming Bird Moth"—see what choice examples I seek for you!—"being gifted with an instinctive appreciation of the objects best suited for its concealment, when it has reasons of its own for so doing, is sure to alight on some surface which presents hues akin to those of its body and wings. It is seldom seen during the hot hours of the day, but comes from its place of concealment in the early morning, and—" The rest is not worth reading.'

'Let me look?' said Stephen. And he came so close to her that she thought it advisable to shift her own position, while he said with apparent indifference,—

'Yes, you are right. The only other trait mentioned is—that his capture is a matter of no small difficulty.'

They looked at each other, laughed, and again flew to arms that might give to one or the other a last chance for victory.

'Some butterflies,' said Stephen, 'can

breathe or look defiance. The Aconthee has a long projection sticking out from its body, which, possibly, hostile insects are expected to look on as a spear; while in its pupa state, the head is absurdly like one of the old jousting helmets of a knight, with the vizor closed.'

'Perhaps you, a moth, might prefer a still more terrible aspect to defend yourself in danger of capture by some admirer. There is a moth with a skull and cross-bones marked on its body—yet with an unpleasant habit of getting into hives and feasting, or wanting to feast, on the honey.'

'A truce to warfare,' cried Stephen. 'I see I shall get the worst of it—if I go on. So let me close with two pretty pictures, which you can apply as you please. The Eurygone opalina simply appears a plain yellow butterfly whilst let alone. But let an admirer take it in hand, and hold it lovingly towards his eyes, while the sun on the other side looks on them, the wings

glow with a golden effulgence that surpasses all power of description; there is a quivering noticed which makes all the tints of the rainbow play over the trembling wings, and the glory reflected from its surface is almost intolerable to the eye! Behold the butterfly in love!'

'Ah—you have given us a really beautiful picture, and one would almost fancy you felt it,' responded the lady.

'The other I still more strongly commend to your attention,' said Stephen. 'It is that of the Poseidon, a lovely butterfly, which the ladies of its country home collect, living, in numbers, to attach by threads to their head; and then appear in public, convinced they are irresistible, while those brilliant insects are fluttering about them like so many lovers round some new and charming coquette of the season.'

'Coquette!' exclaimed Miss Vandeleur, heedless of the adjective attached to it; and the war threatened to change its

character, and become really serious, when they heard the door open, saw the countess enter, and both moved forward to meet her.

And then both saw the glow of pleasure in the countess's face at finding them there together; while feeling they were hypocrites in pretending to reciprocate her feelings, for, in truth, they were neither satisfied with themselves, nor with each other.

CHAPTER XIX.

A COMPACT.

HEARING accidentally from Mr Caxton that he had left Stephen and Miss Vandeleur in the library, the countess had hastened thither, moved by the thought that something might be passing between the pair which would wonderfully lighten her difficulties, and which, it was just possible, her presence at a critical moment might make decisive.

But when she was with them she could not but notice a certain constraint showing itself through their affected air of gaiety, and seeming readiness to enter into any

kind of gossip—as if to keep her aloof from anything serious—affecting them.

She accepted the position, and changed to an attitude that still had the same aim in view, to bring them nearer together.

'Well, my dear, I have altered my mind about the Fancy Fair; and if it will really please you that I go there, then go I will.'

'I am so pleased,' said Miss Vandeleur, kissing the countess warmly. 'And perhaps now a certain gentleman may spare me the many shafts of wit and satire he has been doubtless polishing to let fly at me, for going to such a frivolous place, on such frivolous business.'

'That hardly represents the case, for I myself all the while intended to go,' said Stephen.

'But you must not ask me to take any part,' said the countess. 'I have no spirits for that kind of thing.'

'But which is the very kind of thing to give spirits. Why, I already feel

myself a sort of millionaire in the cause and behalf of the charity,' responded Miss Vandeleur. 'And who can help feeling elevated at the prospect of such a pinnacle? Do come, my dear countess, if only to see that Stephen does not incite me to cheat in delivering up the prizes from the Wheel of Fortune; or if he does, and I succumb to his naughty advances, then of course you will intervene, and bring us both back to the paths of duty, and pecuniary, and all other sorts of innocence.'

The countess laughed heartily, then shook her head, and then yielded.

But now Stephen had something to say.

'I have forsworn gambling; how then can I undertake to turn a wheel for so nefarious a purpose, if that is the dignified post you are so good as to assign me?'

'Will you do it, sir, or not?' demanded Miss Vandeleur; 'or must I apply in some other and more dignified quarter?'

She might not have meant an allusion to Lord Harlaxton, but Stephen thought she did; and while he disliked the remark for her own sake, he could not make up his mind to see them so brought together in public.

'I consent, but am rather a pressed man than a volunteer,' he replied.

'But there is one condition!'

'In favour of the pressed man then I hope, though his chance does not seem very promising.'

'It is this: that you promise me that what you do buy you buy solely of me. You are my retainer, will be in all my secrets, and I can't think of you going about to encourage other women, and setting a bad example generally to all the ladies and gentlemen I expect you to bring to my house of business.'

'May I go the length of buying a button-hole from a lady?'

Miss Vandeleur looked at him with a

grave, deliberate air, then turning to the countess, said,—

'I think we may accord that boon, though he does not go down on his knees to ask us.'

'I think we may,' said the amused countess.

'Very well, I promise,' said Stephen.

'But don't, sir, let me see you with more than one in your coat.'

'Your slave—since that appears to be his fate for the day — shall be found loyal.'

'And you shall be rewarded, as you may deserve,' rejoined Miss Vandeleur, graciously.

There the little group moved to go away and break up, the countess's hopes once more reviving, even from such small encouragement as the last few minutes afforded.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FANCY FAIR.

ODDLY as it may sound, Stephen had never yet attended one of these fashionable exhibitions of philanthropy. This was partly due to his dislike to what he heard of the extreme abandonment of all the ordinary reticence, and natural delicacy of the sex, to the business of money-making. A licensed saturnalia for the ladies he had once called it (when no ladies were present); while on another occasion he had gone the extreme length of denouncing prominent members of these bazaars, or fairs, as Social Brigands, who were permitted to act without

danger to themselves, the costly farce, entitled 'Stand and Deliver!'

But he had another—a more personal, and, on the whole, probably a more influential reason—he had no money to spare in such ways. He was therefore delighted to find that quite unconsciously Miss Vandeleur had removed that difficulty from his path; and that he need not spend a single shilling with her, while prepared with a shield to defend himself from all other predatory ladies.

So that he went to the place of meeting —the Duke of Wellington's Riding School, Knightsbridge—in capital spirits; for he would be able to watch unsuspected Miss Vandeleur's proceedings, and especially how she treated the gentlemen who were sure to flock to her.

For his attitude was still determinedly the same—to watch, and at last get to understand her thoroughly; taking care meantime not to commit himself, partly in consideration of his brother, but also

in obedience to his secret misgiving that she was too like him in the faults and deficencies he was inclining to take to heart, and to remedy; and therefore the last person he ought to marry, even though the path should be honourably open to woo her.

At his entrance he saw her busily engaged in the disposal of her flowers in all kinds of graceful and elegant vases. The hour being yet early, few visitors had arrived.

He paused at some distance, unnoticed, and thus observed how she went into the business as though her heart and soul co-operated.

Stephen could not but admire the rapidity with which the deft fingers formed one group after another, each one improving as she went on in the arrangement of colours, and in the display of characteristic forms.

Pausing a moment to retire a little back, like an artist from his easel, to study

critically the effect, she caught sight of Stephen; and a lively colour instantly suffused her face, to her own extreme annoyance.

So unwelcome was it to its owner that it soon disappeared, and with it the emotion and thoughts his appearance at a moment she happened not to be thinking of him, had called forth.

She advanced with her accustomed frank, not to say audacious, manner to him, and said aloud, as if for the benefit of two pretty girls, her next-door neighbours, the daughters of Lord Magnus,—

'Remember our compact! You have promised to buy nothing from anybody but me.'

'May I, if need be, mention what I am to receive as my part of the bargain?'

The colour again seemed to be rising to her cheek from his significant manner and tone, which brought back the incident of the billiard-room; but her will was strong, she checked it as she answered,—

'Did you ever hear of a knight, on being admitted for the time to do service to a lady, bargaining like a huckster?'

'I think I have, but I own he was not a favourable specimen of the great order of chivalry.'

'Come, then; be yourself the bright example!'

'Your slave is all submission, on your own terms,' said Stephen; with a gesture suggestive of upraised arms and hands salaaming to a mighty queen or princess, and which was so received.

'That is well; we are satisfied, and now what does the Honourable Stephen Chando Froude mean to buy from me, not for my own sake, but for the sake of so inestimable a charity?'

'Really, I have quite forgotten what charity. Do *you* happen to remember?'

Miss Vandeleur could not restrain a hearty laugh at his cool impudence; and would have liked to have given him a rejoinder in his own spirit, but visitors were

flocking in, and business must be seen to. So she simply repeated the question,—

'What do you mean to buy of me?'

'Nothing!'

'How is that?'

'I am too poor to offer a price commensurate with the interests of the charity, and the inestimable condescension of the charming lady who officiates; and, therefore, prefer to stand apart entirely, and help others to fulfil my duty and their own by one and the same act.'

'Ah, that's all very fine!'

'Perhaps it may comfort you if I say, when all your customers have gone home, and the fair like other vanities is at its last gasp, and you are wondering what to do with the shabby and useless remainder, and you are ready to sell at any price, perhaps I may bargain with you; and so without hurting my pocket, set up some costermonger for life by the precious gift.'

'But if you are going to be so shabby as regards yourself,' said Miss Vandeleur,

'I expect all the more devotion and self-sacrifice through you as regards others.'

'Nothing,' replied Stephen, 'shall be too pitiful for them to take, or too costly for them to pay for, if it rests with me, depend upon it. But you must be the true magician: I only your insignificant helper. At your "open sesame" I already see banks on all sides opening their coffers.'

'If you see a banker kidnap him at any risk to begin with, and bring him here.'

So she sent him to make a round of the place, and inveigle by one artifice or another any of the gentlemen he found 'dawdling' about any of the other stalls, to come to hers.

He went obediently, and Miss Vandeleur, notwithstanding her sense of the necessity of close attendance to business, watched his proceedings at the stall where the two pretty and somewhat fast daughters of Lord Magnus 'impounded him' as he pathetically complained to them, by coming one on each side, and insisting on his

purchasing half-a-dozen button holes for his coat, single but fresh buds, artistically veiled in maiden's hair fern, to set an example for the good of the charity, and—

'Only a shilling each, white roses or red!'

'Ah, ladies, I am restricted by the hard mistress I serve for the day to the purchase of a single one.'

'In love and war all things are fair,' said one of the captors.

'And is this love,' he asked, 'or war?'

The pretty ones looked at each other with a laugh, but gave no other answer than by one putting a white rose into his coat, while the other demanded half-a-crown.

'Pardon me: you said a shilling!'

'If six were taken! But I am really almost ashamed to take half-a-crown from a person so distinguished!'

'Let me be quick then, or the half-crown will get to half-a-sovereign!' said Stephen, and he got out his purse.

Both the sisters clapped their hands.

'I thought he was only joking,' said one.

'Ah!' rejoined the previous speaker, 'if now he would only take the whole half-dozen at the same price, how happy he would make us both, wouldn't he? After that, nobody could resist us, whatever price we chose to ask. Think of the glory before you, and pay the money quick! Six half-sovereigns—five pounds!'

'We shall tell everybody of Mr Froude's generosity—we asked one shilling a piece, and he offers ten.'

'Ah, ladies, if I could only reckon up my store by the aid of your admirable system of arithmetic, I don't know what I mightn't do, what extremities of beneficence touch, when *so tempted!* But my arithmetic—confound it!—reverses yours.'

Stephen was, however, so tickled with the simplicity, or the something else of the young ladies, that declining the larger proposal he actually produced a half-sovereign, and surrendered it to the thenceforth lawful owners, for his one rose-bud.

As he went his way a sadder and wiser

man, mentally resolving that no thumb-screws, or other equally effective if less terrible looking instruments in such hands, should wring even a sixpence more out of him, he looked back, and saw Miss Vandeleur waiting and watching for the close of his business with the nobleman's daughters.

A thought struck him, and he at once acted on it. Another of the aristocratic flower brigade challenged him to buy a button hole.

'But you see I am provided.'

'Oh, give me that for the charity, and buy another for yourself.'

Stephen laughed to find that even in the little trick he meant to play Miss Vandeleur, he was helped by an unconscious fellow conspirator; so gave his rose, paid his shilling, and was duly button-holed again.

And a third time the same trick was played, so that when he had gone the round, forgetting entirely the mission confided to him, he found himself returning alone, and face to face with Miss Vande-

leur, who waited to expose him in all the enormity of his behaviour, while yet unconscious of its true extent.

But at the very moment of his return, the last of the rose-sellers, amused with Stephen's trick (for he had been obliged in her case to put her up to it), told it to another, and that one to the lord's daughters; who presented to Miss Vandeleur the identical rose Stephen had paid for so expensively, with laudations on his generous character, and his plan of buying and giving away, and after all keeping only one for himself.

If ever Miss Vandeleur's face suggested incipient and gathering thunder; if ever her eyes shot flashes of indignant and scathing lightning, it was now, as Stephen made full but not quite remorseful confession of his guilt; but declared he would really behave better for the future, if forgiven.

The countess, who kept carefully in the background, sitting by the wheel of fortune,

which was reserved for a while, saw something was wrong, and rose to intervene.

But Miss Vandeleur took care to anticipate her, by condoning the offence for the moment, and sending him a second time on his mission.

But while he sought only to prey, he was himself incessantly preyed upon, at least by attempts.

A timid young lady plucked up boldness to invite his attention to a vase—a superb specimen of Staffordshire pottery; but he stopped her before she could tempt him with the price, by saying,—

'I have promised a lady, under pressure of course, to buy nothing except from her.'

The timid young lady looked as though that settled the question, and drew back.

Not so a near neighbour, a baroness, who had overheard; but not seeming to have done so, challenged him to buy a water-colour drawing, and held it for him to see its beauty.

Her own face was so charming, and had

in it so little of the boldness she assumed as a part to be played, and therefore well played; her hair, dressed more exquisitely than he had ever seen hair dressed before, in little curling knots close fitting to the shape of the beautifully-formed head, so attracted him, that if he looked at the picture at all, he realised only the image of the fair baroness, and heard only the sweet, fascinating, but still womanly and modest, tones of her voice.

He felt ashamed of the answer he must give, and which he did give—his pledge to buy only of one lady, pleading—

'She asked me, insisted—promised on the one hand, and threatened on the other—so how could I resist? I succumbed, and gave my word of honour.'

'This is my own painting,' gently insinuated the baroness, as though she had not caught the point of his logic.

'Ah, that makes my case harder still,' remarked Stephen, with a half attempt at a sigh. 'But honour! My honour is

pledged; you would not have me break faith with a lady?'

'And here's a hand screen, also of my work. Buy that for her, and say that you did not consider such a purchase could possibly be an infringement of the compact.'

Stephen laughed as he replied,

'I'm afraid she'd say I was a Jesuit; that I *had* broken faith with her, and would refuse after all to take the gift.'

'Still the merit and solace of the intention would be yours,' persisted the baroness. 'And as to the picture, I'll take it back with pleasure, and so you will be doubly a benefactor of the charity!'

Again Stephen laughed, as he said,—

'Ah, but my honour—my truthfulness, where would they be? I could not with any satisfaction give even to charity a gift so contaminated. But I promise that as I have not yielded to you, I will not yield to any one; or if I do, I'll come back for the screen; and express my remorse for appearing even to listen to so charming an

advocate for the charity, with so hard a heart.'

A smile answered his parting bow; and the moment he had left her she sent one of her satellites after him to see where he might come to a standstill, and so discover who was the goddess who had so ingeniously secured him beforehand, and to whom he had apparently proved so faithful.

Other interruptions of the same kind Stephen fought through more easily, but they served so to hinder him in his mission, that when again he came in sight of Miss Vandeleur he was alone, no victims in his train.

But not so his task-mistress. Her name, her relations with the Harlaxtons, and her large fortune had got noised about, and her beauty and spirit did the rest. Stephen found her surrounded with young dandies and old beaux, to whom she was handing out single flowers at a guinea a-piece; and though often appealed to, as if seriously, for a month's credit, answered as seriously

she would be happy to oblige them on any occasion but this.

They were pertinacious in their questions, and Stephen, taking a position near enough to hear, but where he was concealed from her, listened for some time to such dialogues as the following :—

'Don't you ask too much ?'

'Can't say, but I take no less.'

'Were they all made by you ?'

'No, but mostly by ladies of much more distinction and merit. And if I am obliged to bring out such facts I shall raise my price. Consider, that to bring here such lovely things we have ransacked the world over—'

'In person ?' interrupted one.

'In spirit, which is much better,' she replied.

'But not so expensive.'

'I am not sure, if the present moment is to be taken into account,' rejoined Miss Vandeleur

Then there was a laugh at the last

questioner's overthrow; who, however, not only joined in the mirth, but went on, delighted perhaps with punishment from such an executioner.

'Did you make any of them?'

'Some!'

'Would you kindly oblige by individualising which?'

'I can refuse nothing to a good customer, but business first, pleasure afterwards.'

She held out one hand with a fairly well imitated flower of the Stephanotis, in a pretty but by no means costly vase, and put the other forward for the money, saying,—

'Five guineas!' and she got it.

'Now then for Miss Vandeleur's own particular flower,' said the buyer.

She produced another Stephanotis, but altogether of a finer character—one that really rivalled the beauty, and even (through some artful contrivance) the scent of the original, and said,—

'That is mine.'

It elicited universal admiration for the flower, and universal mirth for the again discomfited purchaser of the previous one. Professing his desire to buy Miss Vandeleur's, he offered in vain his own for half the price; and then made a virtue of necessity, and gave it back to the charity, and its clever agent.

What was the price of Miss Vandeleur's own artistic production, was now asked by two or three voices.

'It is really a high compliment you pay to me, even while I know your object is mine—to improve the funds of the charity. Therefore, I shall not say one word in depreciation of all the fine things you might be inclined to think and say about my one poor offering, but simply propose to put it up to auction for the highest bidder.'

This was received with acclamation, and the previous purchaser proposed, a little maliciously, amid cries of 'shame,' to begin with,—

'A guinea!

'Five!' said a quiet observer, who had not previously spoken.

'Does the vase go with it?' asked a voice.

'Of course; but we'll sell the flower first,' said Miss Vandeleur.

Six — eight — and ten guineas were offered, and still the fair hand did not fall.

'Come,' she said, 'let's be generous even though we deal with the funds of the charity. The vase shall go with the next bid.'

'Twelve guineas!' cried the previous purchaser; and so made peace with Miss Vandeleur, and carried away his purchase in triumph.

But for one circumstance, Stephen would have enjoyed this exhibition. It had, however, for him a serious drawback. Miss Vandeleur was, he thought, a good deal too profuse in her smiles to some of the young men, that fluttered their little wits about her.

True, he could not detect any particular preference, but the thought brought back all his own previous misgivings about her, and about the scene in which she was so enjoyably engaged.

He went to her; and the others, some knowing him, and the remainder seeing he was a friend of Miss Vandeleur's, gradually edged away, and left them the opportunity of a brief conversation.

'You are getting on, I see,' was his first comment.

'And strange to say without the valuable help I was promised!' was the reply.

'Then you have, in addition to your success, the pleasurable consciousness of being able to say, "Alone I did it!" I congratulate you.'

She saw he was angry, and found no difficulty in discovering the cause. But before she could decide whether her next move should be conciliatory or the reverse, he turned the scale by saying, in a low voice,—

'I see one coming who can pay, and must be made to pay, and who no doubt will be very content to pay, under the circumstances. Come down heavily upon him!'

'Who is that?'

'Lord Harlaxton! Good-bye; I'm tired, and shall go home. Can I do anything for you by the way?'

'Yes; take the countess with you. She too is very tired, though she has been most amiable.'

Stephen looked at her for a single moment. His own going, he thought, might have suggested to her something likely to make him change his purpose. But her getting rid of the countess left him no alternative but to suppose she was glad to be left to herself, free from the eyes of her friends, ready, as he imagined, to join the 'saturnalia of licence' before spoken of.

He obeyed her with careful reserve; and with a few words to his mother to cover the abruptness of his departure,

they went away; and Miss Vandeleur—stern, defiant—saw them go, and turned with fresh smiles to greet the new comer, Lord Harlaxton.

But instead of at once following Stephen's advice—to come down heavily upon him—advice spoiled, perhaps, by the circumstances under which it was given, she merely welcomed him in the usual manner, but rather more cordially; and entered upon familiar conversation, narrating in her liveliest manner such incidents of her own experience as she chose to dwell on, but principally on those that had occurred around her at other stalls; and in doing which her two pretty neighbours bore a very large share—for Miss Vandeleur, like most of us, could keenly detect, and mercilessly expose, those faults in others of which she was herself guilty.

Lord Harlaxton was delighted to find her so amusing, and in such high spirits; while also noticing her avoidance of any pecuniary appeal to him on behalf of the

charity, which seemed to him a trait of peculiar delicacy and refinement.

So he said, when a pause occurred,—

'Now to business; I know I am a victim, but quite resigned. So tell me what you expect in return for one of those very charming flowers I am to consider my own, and which really appear to surpass their originals!'

'Only a blank cheque!' said Miss Vandeleur, with a laugh.

The earl laughed too, but with some misgivings. Did she really mean what she said? And if he gave the cheque, would she fill it up with ten, fifteen, or twenty guineas, or even more?

Well, he would trust her. She would not do anything outrageous. But a lucky alternative occurred to him.

'I don't usually, you know, carry my cheque book about with me, but as I have a little loose cash—'

'Oh, but I can readily accommodate you. Here are writing materials. Step inside

There is a chair and a table. I accept written cheques even from people I don't know. Can I then object to take one from Lord Harlaxton?'

He was caught, and knew it; and repented his over-hasty behaviour, and too flattering estimate of Miss Vandeleur's reticence in business matters. So he allowed her to lead him like a lamb to the slaughter, wrote out his blank cheque, and handed it to her, which she filled up, and then handed to him to look at, saying,—

'Mind, you can easily write another, if you think I have not been sufficiently mindful of your lordship's generosity of heart, or the very great claims of the charity to your particular favour.'

'One hundred guineas!' said the earl aloud. Then concealing his annoyance, he merely said, 'Miss Vandeleur does things so grandly, it is an honour to be her associate!'

Avoiding to spoil the effect of that by any less important matter, he speedily departed. And she was left alone.

With a deep sigh, she sat down on the chair he had vacated, and seemed for a few moments absorbed in painful thoughts; during which all the triumphs of the day, all the enjoyments of the occasion died out, and left behind a sense of inexplicable weariness, and disgust with herself, her customers, and the whole world.

But she was roused by the sight of an illustrious personage coming her way, and presently stopping before her.

Assuming a becoming attitude, she waited for him to speak first.

'I'm told Miss Vandeleur dispenses the most charming things in the fair, but that she asks unconscionable prices, which, it must be obvious, I can't afford!'

Miss Vandeleur laughed.

'Besides, the ladies have stripped me bare before I could get here, or knew the treasures that were yet to tempt me. But come, what is the price of this?'

And the speaker took up the first vase of flowers that lay nearest to his hand.

'Twenty guineas only.'

'Twenty guineas! Be candid. Did it really cost two? Did it cost one?'

'Supposing,' began Miss Vandeleur, 'that to be the case, does not your— see how happily the price is adapted to the occasion! The one marks the charity's sense of the exalted honour done to it by the very exaltation of the price; the other its belief in the pleasure your— will experience in remembering how little it cost the charity!'

The illustrious personage laughed heartily, as he observed,—

'Well, if I am to be once more bamboozled into buying what I don't want, and therefore must pay heavily for it as a matter of course, let me have, at least, something worthy to be kept in remembrance of so charming, and, in every sense, winning a young lady!'

Miss Vandeleur blushed a little at the compliment, and drew from under a cover a very beautiful and really valuable vase,

filled with an assemblage of flowers that made the beauty of the vase more impressive, from their wondrous perfection of form, their mingling of delicate colours, and their artistic truth to the originals.

'The vase your— can judge of more truly than myself.'

'I know it and its origin. English, but of the finest Wedgwood and Flaxman ware. And as to the flowers—'

'They are mine.'

'Your own handiwork?'

'Entirely.'

'I am conquered. Be merciful. Say fifty guineas.'

'I am much too loyal a subject. One hundred is the least; but I really thought—'

'Ah, that'll do! Keep it for me; I'll send you a cheque. Let us shake hands in token our strife ends happily.'

And again Miss Vandeleur was left alone; and to the thoughts and feelings

that had before affected her, and which made all else be quickly forgot.

The place was now full, the air hot and stifling, and she wished heartily the day would end, and she get home.

But she braced herself for fresh exertion as she saw some lady acquaintances coming towards her; when to their astonishment and alarm they saw her hastily put out hands against the stall, as if to keep her from falling, then totter back to the chair, and there drop, and lose for a time in unconsciousness all sense of the things that troubled her.

END OF VOL. I.

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